

**NEW MEDIA IN THE JEWISH BEDROOM: EXPLORING RELIGIOUS  
JEWISH ONLINE DISCOURSE CONCERNING GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

A Dissertation

by

RUTH TSURIA

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|                     |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| Chair of Committee, | Heidi A. Campbell |
| Committee Members,  | Tasha Dubriwny    |
|                     | Claire Katz       |
|                     | Cara Wallis       |
| Head of Department, | Kevin Barge       |

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines the construction and negotiation of gender and sexuality in Jewish Orthodox online discourse. It explores how religious concepts of gender and negotiation were communicated online, and how they were supported or resisted by users and website authors. My approach conceptualizes online digital communication as a Foucauldian discourse, in which power and resistance operate. To understand this discourse, scholars have to consider both the digital affordances and the religious worldviews that inform that discourse. For that purpose, I consider three layers of the religious digital discourse: 1) the technological aspects, 2) the religious/cultural aspects, and 3) the discursive strategies.

Three websites were selected (on the basis of popularity) to represent the Orthodox online discourse: Chabad.org, Aish.com and Kipa.co.il. From these websites various texts regarding gender and sexuality were sampled: questions and answers (Q&A); website articles; and videos. A total of n=60 Q&A, n=48 articles and videos, and n=1184 comments were sampled and analyzed. The material was divided into two chapters: one chapter focusing on practices, and the other chapter focusing on meaning making.

It was found that the technological affordances (layer 1), by and large, allow for and encourage a participatory discourse. The second layer of analysis found that religious language was oversimplified, with minimum use of canonic religious sources,

and was accompanied by modern and secular terms. The last layer of analysis highlighted twelve unique discursive strategies.

The major finding of this research is that online communication was used to support traditional, strict, religious gender and sexual norms: most of the users and authors supported a literal reading of biblical and legal (*halachic*) texts concerning sexual behaviors and gender roles and a binary and patriarchal understanding of gender. However, this traditional approach to gender and sexuality tended to be framed through modern, spiritual, or neoliberal language that focused on self-actualization. There was little resistance or push for change of these religious traditional rules. Digital media affordances – the ability to comment and share, to participate in this discourse – by and large served to maintain religious sexual and gender norms.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, the feminist; to my father, the technologist.

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Every big project, and a dissertation is definitely a big project, is a collaborative process. Even if the project carries one name, there are countless of conversations, discussions, disagreements, challenges, rants and jokes that took place with many people, whose name is not on the cover. This is the place where I can mention at least some of these names.

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## **NOMENCLATURE**

|      |  |
|------|--|
| Q&A  | Questions and Answers                  |
| SST  | Social Shaping of Technology           |
| RSST | Religious Social Shaping of Technology |
| ICT  | Information and Communication Studies  |
| CDA  | Critical Discourse Analysis            |



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# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Religious traditions adjust to and exist in the material affordances and limitations of the world around them. Technology has been a powerful force in the development of religions. Communications technologies in particular have been used to spread religious ideas, negotiate religious authority, and construct religious worldviews and concepts. In this dissertation, I examine how digital communication technologies are used by religious Jewish communities to construct and negotiate traditional norms of gender and sexuality.

With the emergence of the Internet and digital media technologies scholars began to study the relationship between this new communication technology and religion. The field of Digital Religion studies, as it is currently referred to, explores the “evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously” (Campbell, 2013, p. 1). This dissertation project takes a feminist media studies approach to digital religion, asking how these new media may be used in the construction and negotiation of gender and sexual norms of members of a religious group. More specifically, I am concerned with how Orthodox (religiously observant) Jewish communities negotiate concepts of gender and sexuality online. In this dissertation, I suggest a theoretical approach that conceptualizes the digital as a Foucauldian discourse, in which power and resistance operate. Furthermore, I suggest that in order to understand this discourse, we have to consider the digital affordances and the religious worldviews

that inform the discourse. For that purpose, I suggest a tri-layered analysis model that considers three “layers” of the religious digital discourse: 1) the technological aspects, 2) the religious/cultural aspects, and 3) the discursive strategies.

Most of the scholarly study of Jewish interaction with digital media has been focused on the ultra-Orthodox reactions against new media (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Campbell, 2011; Horowitz, 2000; Rosenthal and Ribak, 2015; Tsuriei, 2012) and the impact of new media on Jewish authority or institutions (Lerner, 2009; Steinitz, 2011; Pitkowsky, 2011; Raucher, 2015; Lev-On and Shahar, 2011, 2013). In the recently published book *Digital Judaism*, Heidi Campbell (2015) called upon scholars to search for more “interpretive categories for describing these [strategies and responses to digital technologies]” (p. 1). This dissertation hopes to answer this call and contribute to the overarching field of research by examining the existence of power and resistance in the digital discourse itself, thus providing another interpretive approach to the study of “digital Judaism.” That is, in this project, I expand current scholarship on digital Judaism by offering a more explicitly *feminist* perspective on the relationship between Judaism and new media. By “feminist” I mean to capture the unique contribution of scholarship influenced by the concerns and attitudes of the women’s liberation movement. These concerns have led scholars to consider more carefully the instrumental issues of gender and power in cultural studies. That is, the feminist perspective demands that we examine the cultural institutions and discourses that maintain patriarchal power (Walby, 1989). In the case of digital media, the medium enables new forms of power and resistance, which will be explored in this dissertation.

I suggest we can learn about the negotiation of Jewish religious terminology online through the lenses of the discussion of gender and sexuality. As in other religious traditions, gender is pivotal in the structure of Jewish life, worldview, and praxis. As Mia Lövhelm argued, “Gender is... a fundamental source for structuring identities, traditions, values and rituals within religious traditions” (2013, p. 2). In the case of Judaism, which is a praxis-based religion, gender and sexuality norms are defined and corrected through *Halachic* practice. *Halacha* is the Jewish legal code that constructs and determines Jewish life. It informs daily and ritualistic behavior – from prayers and holidays to financial and personal relationships. When it comes to gender and sexuality, *Halachic* code dictates how men and women should behave towards one another, which roles they can take in the community and in the household, and how they understand and practice their sexuality (Dosick, 2010; Rosenthal, 2013). *Halachic* code, however, is not stable, but constantly adaptable to historical and social contexts – to Jewish lived experience (Dosick, 2010). The negotiation of *Halacha* and Jewish life has thus far taken place through texts or lived experience. The digital offers a sort of combination of both, and online, researchers can see how lived communicative behaviors (users asking questions, commenting, sharing on social media) inform religious lives and meaning (Bellar, 2013). In this dissertation I suggest exploring online communication as a discourse in which the negotiation of gender and sexual norms takes place.

This exploration is important for a couple of reasons. First, as a feminist I argue that it is pivotal to expose the construction of gender and sex and the power structures that enforce, maintain, or re-create them. This approach also answers a need to address



issues of intersectionality (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.) in the study of religion and digital media. Second, sexuality and gender are key concepts in the construction of religious traditions (Lövheim, 2013) and are important for Jewish practices and conceptualization of peoplehood. If we as scholars are to understand digital Judaism, we must observe how these new communication technologies are being used by, and how they are influential on, religious individuals as they negotiate their understanding of gender identity and sexual practices. That is, we need to explore how the digital is entering into the Jewish bedroom. After all, as the *Talmud* (Jewish canonic text) already reminds us, sexual intercourse is *Torah*, and one must study it (Bavli, Berachot, 62a). Lastly, as will be argued throughout this dissertation, the exploration of the online hegemonic discourse – religious or otherwise – highlights the ways in which digital technologies are used to resist and enforce power. It shows that this online negotiation creates a discourse with a tendency towards the strict, or the extreme. It further contributes to the study of Digital Religion by suggesting a theoretical and methodological approach that views the digital as a discourse, while at the same time considering the religious worldviews and technological affordances that inform this discourse.

### **Context: Understanding Contemporary Judaism**

In order to understand the background of this dissertation, some context about the communities under consideration is pivotal. There is an old joke, whose origins are lost

to time, and which has appeared in a variety of different versions. In one version, the joke goes that there were once two Jews who were shipwrecked on an island. Many years later, they are rescued and as they are sailing away from the island, the captain of the ship notes there are three synagogues on the island. He asks why the two Jews needed three synagogues. One of the Jews answers, saying, “The one on the right is my Orthodox synagogue. The one on the left is his reform synagogue. And the one in the middle is the one we would never attend.” This attitude is also reflected in religious scripture, for example, the *Talmud* states that “there are seventy faces to the *Torah*” (Bamidbar Raba 13:15). Although Judaism is by no means unique among the world religions in its diversity and variety, it may nonetheless be true that Judaism has a special degree of self-awareness of this variety. The history of Judaism is rife with examples and events that testify to the diversity of interpretation and expression that the Jewish religion has permitted. Even though some groups excommunicate each other, there persists the notion that all of these expressions are somehow “Jewish,” and that the synagogues one never enters should nonetheless have their place on the island. What follows will therefore be merely an approximate description of the varieties of Judaism, and it will concern only those expressions of contemporary Judaism with some historical background.

Contemporary Judaism has its roots in the rabbinical (Pharisees) tradition, which highlighted daily and communal praxis over temple or Messianic worship. Exiled from Israel during early and late Antiquity, Judaism has been, for most of history, a diasporic religion. Therefore, Jewry can be split between the *Ashkenazim* (European-decent) and

*Sephardi* (Arab- decent) denominations. *Ashkenazim* in turn were split between two major groups, the *Chassidim* (the Pious), a charismatic sect that structured much of Jewish religious life around the reverence of rabbinical authority, and the *Mitnagdim*, a group that defined itself mostly in terms of their opposition to the perceived innovations of the *Chassidim* and their devotion to *Torah* study. (*Mitnagdim* literally means “those who protest.”) During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Judaism underwent a massive change in response to the political, social, scientific, and spiritual upheavals engendered by the European Enlightenment. Jews in Europe responded in one of three ways, thus creating three major divisions of Judaism as they exist today. One of the reactions to the Enlightenment was to fully embrace secularism and with it a host of contemporary European ideas, including nationalism, ideas that would later lead to the creation of the State of Israel. This reaction led to the creation of secular or cultural Judaism. Other Jews responded to the Enlightenment by strengthening their commitment to their traditions and rejecting many of the ideas of secularity. This denomination, known as Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy, centers its worldview on the importance of the *Halacha* (religious legal code) which is considered divinely inspired. Aside from these two extremes there were also a loosely connected series of movements that sought to maintain some of the religious beliefs and customs of Judaism, while rejecting many of the legal practices. These are the Conservatives (*Masoriti*), Reform, and Reconstructionist denominations. Conservative Judaism conceptualizes the *Torah* as a model book, one that can be re-interpreted to fit modern life and values. Reconstructionists, like Conservatives, have a far looser conception of the importance of Jewish ritual, degrading its importance to that

of community maintenance. Reform Judaism, in general, thinks of *Torah* and *Halacha* more like guiding principles (Dosick, 2010).

Contemporary Judaism has two main geographical centers: the USA and Israel. There are Jewish communities in Europe, Canada, Australia, South America, Africa, and Asia, but these communities are less notable in the religious and political scene. As a result, scholars in the field of contemporary Jewish studies tend to focus on communities in the USA and Israel. Not all Jewish individuals are religious (Cooperman et al., 2013; Dosick, 2010). Because Judaism can be thought of as a religion, ethnicity, culture, or some combination of these three, Jews might feel connected to Judaism, or describe themselves as Jewish, yet not practice the religious aspects of Judaism. In Israel, where Judaism is the majority national religion, most Israeli Jews identify as either secular (43% of the Jewish population) or traditional (23%). Twenty-five percent self-identify as religious, and 9% label themselves as ultra-Orthodox (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010). According to PEW research, one in five Jews in the USA define themselves as slightly-to-not religious (Cooperman et al., 2013). Ten percent of Jews living in the USA define themselves as Orthodox, 35% Reform, and 18% Conservative (Cooperman et al., 2013). While Orthodoxy still represents a minority in both the Israeli and USA Jewish populations, it is a rapidly growing sector. According to the PEW research: “Though Orthodox Jews constitute the smallest of the three major denominational movements, they are much younger, on average, and tend to have much larger families than the overall Jewish population. This suggests that their share of the Jewish population will grow” (Cooperman et al., 2013, p. 10). Similarly in Israel, the

Orthodox sector is predicted to double each decade (Paltiel et al., 2011). Thus, trends and norms in these communities are bound to be influential on the general Jewish population. This dissertation research focuses on the more religiously observant portions of the Jewish population, namely those within the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox denominations.

The Orthodox denomination is defined as “Jewish religious communities that seek to learn and to live by traditional practices and laws (*Halacha*)” (Golan and Campbell, 2015, p. 469). This definition stresses the most important difference between Orthodoxy and other Jewish religious denominations: Orthodox communities are (fairly strictly) committed to a *Halachic* way of life, to a varying degree; they consider the *Torah* and *Halacha* as divinely inspired and as the main pillars of Judaism (Dosick, 2010). Orthodox Judaism has also developed into several different offshoots, which may be distinguished predominantly by their religious observance and the degree to which they include modern conceptions. One side of the spectrum can be labeled as Modern Orthodox. Members of Modern Orthodoxy adhere to Orthodox religious belief and praxis, but for the most part have accepted many modern values such as the use of technology and nationalism. For example, the National Religious group in Israel (established late 19<sup>th</sup> century), while Orthodox in its approach to the *Halachic* way of life, has embraced modern concepts of the nation and sees its main value in combining *Torah* with *Avoda* (literally, “work,” meaning the work of maintaining a state in Israel, employment even within the secular society, working to better the world). On the other side of the spectrum, there are several groups that may be subsumed under the general

category of “ultra-Orthodox” (*Haredim*). These groups have the strictest interpretation of *Halacha*, tend to be self-isolating, and reject modern values. However, even within ultra-Orthodoxy there is a varying degree of exclusion, with groups like the Gur sect that live in isolated villages and neighborhoods, and some sects who object to and reject the State of Israel. Other ultra-Orthodox groups are more inclusive, like the Chabad sect that seeks out interactions with the secular world and uses digital communication technology (the ultra-Orthodox are more likely than the other groups to include *Chassidim*). Generally, most Orthodox individuals fall between Modern Orthodox and extreme ultra-Orthodox, constantly having to negotiate their adherence to *Halacha* and tradition with their daily work and life in a modern society (El-Or, 1994). This negotiation is most starkly observed when it comes to issues of gender/sex and media consumption. The next two subsections review the general Orthodox attitudes toward gender/sex, and Orthodox adoption and negotiation of media.

***Jewish discourse on sex and gender.*** Gender and sexuality are central to the structure of Jewish life, worldview, and praxis, as previously discussed. The perceived differences between men and women inform both daily practices and long held issues of identity pivotal for Judaism. That is, gender differentiation plays an important role in Jewish ritual life. For example, in Orthodox Jewish synagogues men and women are separated by a barrier (*mechitzah*). Supposedly, this is because prayer demands absolute focus on the divine, and women would be inherently distracting to men (essentializing the position of women as sexual objects of male gratification). Furthermore, in Jewish communal prayer, there is an explicit requirement of ten men to form a *minyan* (quorum)

– boys under the age of 13, mentally disabled men, and women do not count toward the completion of a *minyan*.

Orthodox daily life is comprised of the need to fulfill *Mitzvos* (commandments). Many of these *mitzvot* are both icons of Jewish identity and performable only by men. Such *mitzvot* include the wearing of *tzitzit* (tassels on the corners of one's clothing), the binding of *tefillin* (phylacteries containing parchment scrolls) on the forehead and on the arm, and the requirement to pray three times a day. In contrast, women have mostly three commandments: they must light candles on Friday evenings and on festivals, they must prepare *challah* (ceremonial bread), and they must obey the laws of family life. The last two commandments in their vagueness can be (and have been) further interpreted to include the obligation to keep and promote a *kosher* home (as *challah* would be invalid if not prepared in a *kosher* home), and to avoid intimate contact with one's husband while menstruating (i.e., to obey the laws of *niddah*), or more generally maintain "correct" sexuality. The *Mitzvos* define what constitute "correct" gender relations and sexual relations.

***Contextualizing Jewish discourse on gender.*** As in most traditions, gender in Judaism is based on the dichotomous distinction male/female, man/woman (Schleicher, 2011; Cantor, 1995). Throughout Jewish history, women were ascribed to the house and prohibited from obtaining public responsibilities, such as community leadership. At the same time, Judaism is matriarchically concerned, as the ethnicity of being Jewish is inscribed only through the mother. (That is, the child of a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman is considered non-Jew.) In this way, the Jewish woman plays an important role

in Jewish history, as a mother and an educator (Koltun, 1976; Dosick, 2010).

Furthermore, the masculine/feminine distinctions in Judaism are not based on physical power, but on intellectual access (Boyarin, 1997; Cantor, 1995). The Jewish male, according to Boyarin, is constructed as feminine, timid, and learned, which, while in contrast to the European ideal man, is the Jewish ideal of appealing masculinity:

The East European Jewish ideal of the gentle, timid, and studious male – Edelkayt – moreover, does have origins that are deeply rooted in traditional Jewish culture... These characteristics, however, were not supposed to render the male even slightly unappealing... indeed, he is represented as the paramount desiring male subject and object of female desire (1997, p. 2).

The positioning of masculinity in *Torah* studies has *de facto* made religious and scholarly spaces and actions a segregated space from which women were excluded. Boyarin, following other feminist thinkers, showed how in Jewish tradition, patriarchy was not a violent, but a “kinder, gentler patriarchy,” which can also be called “soft patriarchy.” Nevertheless, this cultural system still controlled women’s bodies, property, habits and intellectual rights, and occupational options (1997, p. 184). Boyarin argued that the exclusion of women from studying *Torah* was not motivated by possible contamination of the holy scrolls or even the fear of erotic tension in the process of studying. (If this were the case, separate areas for *Torah* study for men and women would have been created.) Instead, the exclusion was based on the perceived inherent masculinity of Torah study: “If study defined the rabbinic male, then the exclusion of women was the practice that constructed gendered differentiation and hierarchy within that society” (1997, p. 153). Indeed, one can see that as the gender boundaries are bent in



contemporary Jewish society, women studying *Torah* (either in segregated or co-ed spaces) becomes more common practice.

Excluding women from *Torah* and *Halacha* study also reflects how this Jewish religious-legal discourse was used to maintain patriarchal gender structures. In her book *Women and Jewish Law* (1984), Rachel Biale explored how the Jewish legal system constructed and regulated gender roles and women's lives. For example, in the first chapter Biale began by exploring the biblical commandments addressed to a certain gender or sex (such as circumcision, biologically addressed only to men). She continued by presenting the rabbinical logic of categorizing the *mitzvot* according to positive/negative, time bound, or not time bound. *Halachic* texts suggest women are exempt from positive time-bound *mitzvot*, but through further analysis of the law, Biale showed how the logical presentation is inconsistent; a more accurate model is that women are exempt from practices that might interfere with their domestic duties:

The principle that women are exempt from all time-bound positive *mitzvot* [...] was probably an after-the-fact attempt to explain and systemize the reality that women did not perform all the *mitzvot* equally with men. Therefore it is not at all surprising that there are a good many exceptions to the rule [...] the common thread uniting them [the practices that women are exempt from] is that they are all obligations outside the realm of women's domestic role (1984, p. 17).

Thus, it seems the Jewish religious discourse concerning gender and sexuality was mostly concerned with separating the domestic (female) and the public (male). This discourse mostly takes place and derives its power through the *Halachic* discourse. As a result, the question of combining Orthodox Jewish life, which is based on *Halacha*, with

feminist ideas has been taken up by scholars of Jewish feminism. As made clear by the prominent feminist Jewish scholar Rachel Adler:

Whether gender justice is possible within halakhah and whether a feminist Judaism requires a halakhah at all are foundational questions for feminist Jewish theology that have no parallel in Christian feminist theology. . . . Appropriating the terms and method of halakhah itself, many feminists concluded, drew them into a game they could not win. . . . Halakhah became the feminists' elephant in the living room (1998, xx).

As a result, some Jewish feminists reject *Halacha*. But from an Orthodox perspective, that is not possible. Therefore, Orthodoxy has to negotiate both feminism and *Halacha*. According to Irshai, that is not an obstacle, but rather a necessity. Irshai considered *Halachic* discourse as a discourse in a Foucauldian sense, meaning as a site of struggle, one that has the potential to change and shift. That is, she suggested that all people participating in *Halachic* discourse have the option to resist, construct, and take part in the discourse. She did not think that this is a game in which feminists “could not win,” but rather, one they have to play wisely:

I suggested at the outset that, in the manner suggested by Foucault and Fish, the halakhic community functions as a player in the game and already has the power to influence the shaping of the hegemonic halakhic narrative. But that is not the full picture; for one who is empowered must know as well how to deploy that power wisely. Only in that way will it be possible to achieve any sort of consensus (2010, p. 75).

Whether or not feminism and *Halacha* can live together, it is clear from this review that the study and interpretation of *Torah* and its rules (*Halacha*) is the discourse in which gender and sexuality were and are constructed and negotiated in Judaism. Biale's (1984) epilogue reviewed current Jewish reactions to feminist thought. For some, there is no need to reconcile *Halacha* with feminism, since they reject either *Halacha* or feminism.

But for Jews who want to live a religious and feminist life, the need for reconciliation is grave. Biale gave several examples for different ways to combine Jewish law and feminist thought – from a (postfeminist?) position of equal but different, to a radical call for new legal leadership within Judaism. As will be seen throughout this dissertation, the digital discourse creates another avenue for the negotiation of gender and sexuality. However, while the medium might be new, the discourse is still concerned with practice and meaning through the interpretation of *Torah* and *Halacha*.

***Contextualizing Jewish discourse on sexuality.*** Sexuality is a complex topic in Jewish religious theology, as it is subjected to both negative and positive attitudes. As a general rule, sexual intercourse is not only permitted, but encouraged. A healthy sexual relationship is both a virtue and a duty for married couples (Rockman, 1995). Marital sexual relations are governed by two *Mitzvos* (commandments): the obligation to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1.28) and the husband’s obligation to give his wife her conjugal rights, which are understood as regular sexual relations (at least once a week, according to some Jewish sources). If a husband refuses or is incapable, this can be a legitimate reason for the woman to seek a divorce (*Mishna* [Jewish legal text], *Ketovot*, 5:5-6). In short, Jewish law and thought do not understand sex as an unclean or sinful activity, but rather as the core upon which a healthy Jewish lifestyle must be based. However, this positive attitude toward sex is applicable only to highly regulated sexual behavior (Schwartz, 2012). In his book *Kosher Sex: A Recipe for Passion and Intimacy* Rabbi Boteach (2000) celebrated the following *Halachic* (legal) restrictions: First of all, sex outside of marriage is strictly forbidden. This includes both adultery and sexual

relationships between two single people. For Boteach, monogamy is an idealized sexual lifestyle that will stabilize society. He also explained how sexual relations should occur – in the missionary position, and in the dark (Boteach, 2000). Furthermore, *Halacha* forbids coitus or any physical contact during the woman’s menstruation and for seven days thereafter. Of course, homosexuality in all its forms is strictly forbidden. Lastly, male masturbation is prohibited, and female masturbation is discouraged.

Although earlier rabbinical texts permitted greater flexibility during coitus (for example, Maimonides allowed for oral sex, see *Rambam, Mishne Torah, Issurei-Biah*, 21:9), Boteach represents an authoritative contemporary rabbi (Theobald, 2012), as well as the general rabbinical movement toward a more restrictive view of sexuality (Stadler, 2009). In an attempt to explore current trends within this community, Stadler interviewed contemporary (postmillennial) Israeli ultra-Orthodox students and surveyed the handbooks, audio, and visual materials the students received. She found the rabbinical material focused on overcoming one’s bodily needs, counting sexual desires as one of the most dangerous needs (2009). Englander and Sagi (2013) pointed to similar trends in the National Religious movement, which tends to be more generally open about issues of sexuality. According to Englander and Sagi, in the last twenty years this religious community has started to be stricter relative to modesty, for example, by segregating schools and youth-movements. Englander and Sagi (2013), Stadler (2009), and Theobald (2012) all agreed that this growing panic about sexual “purity” is most likely a response to the sexual “promiscuity” of the modern, liberal world. Stadler went one step further and described how in Israel, the ultra-Orthodox discourse about sexual

modesty has become militant in its presentation of sexual purity as a battle against “the evil inclination” (Stadler, 2009). This increasingly militant attitude against sexuality does not represent all Orthodox communities, but it does stem from a similar general attitude which resists the open, promiscuous sexuality usually associated with modern western society. This resistance, I argue, colors the way in which Orthodox communities and individuals interact with modern media. This is true concerning old media (television, newspapers, etc.), as well as digital media. Indeed, a few Orthodox communities choose to create their own media content in which they can censor offensive sexual images or external ideas (Katz, 2012).

As can be seen from this context, Orthodox Jewish attitudes towards gender and sexuality tend to be traditionalist, but at the same time, they are constantly negotiated through people’s lived experience. While some ultra-Orthodox shy away from modernity, most Orthodox communities embrace modernity to some level, and as a result, also have to negotiate modern attitudes towards sexuality and gender, such as feminism, LGBTIQ, or pre-marital intimacy. This is especially true for the types of Orthodox groups that are not in opposition to modern and/or digital media, as these media make accessible to users a variety of attitudes and worldviews and allow religious users to more easily communicate their needs and disagreements. That is, interaction with digital media has the potential to reshape communal norms concerning sexuality and gender (Baumel-Scwartz, 2013). It is exactly this negotiation of gender and sexual norms that this dissertation highlights – the space in which modernity and tradition are negotiated when it comes to gender/sex norms. While Jewish women’s use of the online

has been studied (Baumel-Schwartz, 2009; Lev-On and Shahar, 2011; Shahar and Lev-On, 2013; Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Livio and Tenenboim, 2007; Raucher, 2015; Pitkowsky, 2011; Baumel-Schwartz, 2013) and will be further reviewed in the literature review chapter, previous studies did not consider the discursive strategies used to construct gender/sex. This dissertation contributes to current scholarship by highlighting how gender and sexuality as norms and concepts are negotiated and constructed online, as well as by considering the power of digital discourse in this construction. This negotiation and construction, I suggest, can be accessed by the researcher (and users) through the Orthodox digital discourse. In order to understand more fully why and how Jewish Orthodox groups use digital media, the following section provides a review of general Orthodox attitudes towards digital media.

***Digital media and Judaism.*** The study of Judaism and digital media should be thought of as a continuation of the more general study of Judaism and media, which has focused on the representation of Judaism in general media, as well as on the reaction, adoption, and use of mass media by Jewish communities. This included studies of mass media such as television, radio, and newspapers (Katz, 2012), as well as community produced media, such as books and audio cassettes (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Fader, 2013) and the representation of religious Jews in Israeli media (Cohen, 2005, 2012). Both research on old media and new media tended to consider what role the media play in communal and religious norms construction and how these religious communities negotiate their relation with media (Fader, 2009; Blondheim and Caplan, 1993). This is especially noted in the reaction to digital media, a medium which is more

open and less easily restricted. The lack of communal and rabbinical regulation of digital media poses threats to the Orthodox communities, for which regulated communal life is pivotal (Campbell, 2010). Especially considering negotiation and gender issues, scholars have portrayed the Internet as an avenue for resistance or transgression (Livio and Teneboim-Weinblatt, 2007; Tsrafty and Balis, 2002). The themes highlighted in current scholarship on digital media and Judaism have tended to portray either Jews as resisting the medium or the medium as a tool for resistance, which then needs to be explained through apologetic discourses (Campbell, 2015).

Although there seems to be a general rejection of digital media by ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox Jews, Heidi Campbell and other scholars have argued that this is not a complete rejection, but rather a complicated negotiation. Campbell (2010) maintained that many Jewish religious communities negotiate new media in various ways. For example, the Chabad sect, which has a missionary vocation within Judaism, embraced the Internet fairly early on for outreach purposes. Since the Internet supplied business opportunities, especially for women who could utilize the Internet for work while staying home, ultra-Orthodox communities had to shape tools to allow access to the Internet whilst maintaining community boundaries and the authority of the religious leaders (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Livio and Tenenboim, 2007). In 2008, the ultra-Orthodox leaders allowed community members to use the Internet for work. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) argued, this process is best understood as “cultured technology,” where specific communities localize the Internet for their needs, instead of simply rejecting or accepting it. One way in which the technology of the Internet is

being cultured is by restricting certain content online. This can be done, for example, via the use of a specific internet filtering program – Internet Rimon (<http://www.neto.net.il/>). This program filters internet content and provides access only to “kosher” content, that is, content clean of sexual or heretical meaning. Another way in which Jewish communities negotiate their relationship with digital media is by creating “local” spaces – blogs, web pages, or web-portals specific for their communities. These “digital enclaves” (Campbell and Golan, 2011), like the Kipa.co.il site (for the Israeli Orthodox community) or *Behederi Haredim* blog portal (for the Israeli ultra-Orthodox community), are where religious communities create a safe haven online for their religious denominations. What was emphasized in these studies was the importance of Religious Social Shaping of Technology (Campbell, 2010), the “culturing” of technology – i.e., how these religious communities embrace, negotiate, and use the Internet for religious purposes in their everyday life.

In this dissertation, I am interested not in the cases of total rejection of digital media, but rather, in the Orthodox communities that embraced it early on and use it for religious purposes. The Orthodox communities examined in this project embraced the missionizing tools and communal resources the Internet offers. Among these religious entrepreneurs, three websites stand out in their early adoption of internet technology and their current breath of materials: Chabad.org, Aish.com, and Kipa.co.il. These websites provided a starting point for religious Jews to interact with the Internet in a “safe environment,” which Campbell and Golan described as “Digital Enclaves” (2011). Therefore, I suggest that it is via these websites, in which a purposeful religious use of



digital media occurs, that we can examine how this everyday use of digital media shapes Jewish religious “common-sense” mainstream concepts of gender and sexuality. That is, Jewish religious websites which normalize religious use of the Internet and use it to negotiate and construct religious ideological issues are seen as the “Orthodox Digital Discourse.”

### **Approaching Orthodox Digital Discourse - The Three Websites in Focus**

This dissertation focuses on three websites which can be thought of as forming an Orthodox digital discourse. The three websites in focus – Chabad.org, Aish.com, and Kipa.co.il – were all established early and serve as centers of knowledge for Jewish information in the USA and Israel. That is, these websites were early leaders regarding Jewish content online (Green, 1997) and are currently leading in terms of online traffic (Elbinger, 2012). Some context about each website is important for understanding how they come together in this dissertation and how they negotiate digital media.

***The Chabad movement and Chabad.org.*** Chabad.org is a website created by the Chabad Orthodox community during the 1990’s. The *Chabadnikim*, or Lubavitchers as they are varyingly called, are the largest *Chassidic* Jewish group in the world, thanks primarily to the efforts of the last rabbi in the *Chassidic* lineage, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known to the Lubavitchers as “the Rebbe.” The Chabad movement was founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe by rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, as a *Chassidic* movement established on Kabbalistic (mystical) thinking. The Chabad sect, like most

*Chassidic* sects, is centered on the worship of a specific rabbi and his lineage, operating in ways not so different from a regal court. A descendent of Schneur Zalman, rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), was the most influential rabbi in the Chabad movement and perhaps one of the most influential rabbis in the world (Heilman and Friedman, 2010). The “Rebbe,” living in New York, saw the goal of the Chabad movement as bettering the world and to regrowing Judaism after the Holocaust. He acted politically and religiously to spread Judaism and promote and provide education and human rights using any available tools. (He created “Education Day” in the USA, and it is to this day celebrated on his birthday.) He met with world leaders and took an active position both concerning Israel and maintaining peace between the US and Russia during the Cold War (Heilman and Friedman, 2010). His Jewish outreach inspired Chabad to create outposts in every country and to utilize media to connect secular Jews with Judaism. Chabad is famous for its practice of establishing Chabad Houses throughout the world, especially in tourist destinations and in USA colleges. These houses are missionizing outposts where any Jew can receive the comfort of a *Kosher Shabbat* meal. For some, this is the first contact with Judaism. This missionizing ideology takes place online as well as offline, and Chabad as a movement perceives all media as ways of proselytizing.

Chabad’s attitude towards media in general and digital media specifically is welcoming (Rashi and McCombs, 2015). According to Rashi and McCombs, The Rebbe:

Recognized the media’s tremendous inherent power and refused to shy away from using it to advance his religious views simply because it was

generally associated with concepts alien to a Jewish religious lifestyle. Although he completely forbade reading secular newspapers and viewing secular television, he did issue a call to his followers to exploit media technology in order to popularize Jewish thought... (2015, p. 134).

One of his followers, Yosef Yitzchak Kazen, answered this call and already in the early 1990s was exploring the Internet as a tool for missionizing. He became the creator of Chabad.org. According to the Chabad.org narrative, “Throughout his persistent pursuit of his activities on the web Kazen was ridiculed as wasting his time. ‘I asked the Rebbe if it would be worthwhile to look into going on the Internet,’ Kazen said in 1997. ‘And the Rebbe said to go ahead with it – absolutely pursue it.’” (Zaklikowski, n.d.). Chabad embraces and uses digital media as tools to proselytize and define Judaism. While a distinction between outward and inward communal use exists, community members also use the Internet in their private lives, for religious purposes and community connectivity (Golan, 2015).

***Aish HaTorah organization and Aish.com.*** Another Orthodox Jewish organization and religious sect that embraced the Internet early on is *Aish HaTorah* (The Fire of *Torah*), an organization that, like Chabad, has a missionizing aim. Whereas Chabad’s doctrines and practices are in some conflict with the less *Chassidic* streams of Judaism stemming from the *Mitnagdim*, the mission statement of *Aish HaTorah* includes an explicit intent to blend *Chassidic* and *Mitnagdic* streams of Judaism (Aish, 2017). *Aish HaTorah* is considered a new religious movement with a transnational orientation (Golbert, 2001; Tapper, 2002; Campbell and Bellar, 2015). Established in 1974 by Rabbi Noah Weinberg (1930-2009), an American-born Jew who moved to Israel in the

1960s, the organization's main goal is *Kiruv* (outreach to secular Jews). *Aish HaTorah* is also very involved and concerned about the State of Israel, and sees bringing Jews to Israel as their mission. Their website features a Western Wall camera, so that one can access this holy site from anywhere in the world (Aish, 2017). (The State of Israel awarded them two building sites adjunct to the Western Wall.) The organization created a program that brings American university students to Israel for a two-week intensive study trip, offers Jerusalem Fellowships, and takes part in *Hasbara* (the Israeli Foreign Ministry's program for presenting and explaining Israel's actions) (Aish, 2017b). They encourage a transnational connection between Jews in the State of Israel and see it as a way of advancing their goal of giving all Jews access to their heritage.

Weinberg saw bringing as many Jews "back to the flock" as possible as his mission. To achieve this, he first created *yeshivas* (religious higher-education institutions) that would educate "*kiruv*-soldiers." The organization grew and established various schools and centers in Israel and the USA (Tapper, 2002), conducted seminars and programs throughout the world (Golbert, 2001), and embraced media, including digital media, for outreach purposes. They understand the Internet as a place in which they can reach people who are interested in Judaism, but are not ready to commit. In an interview conducted by Campbell and Bellar (2015), one of Aish.com web editors explained:

People are often curious about their Jewish roots, but don't know what is available to them. They trust us because of what they see and read on our site. [...] the online contact helps them get over the hurdle to explore Judaism more offline (p. 76).

While the outward use of digital media is acceptable for Aish members, personal or inward communal use is deemed more problematic (Campbell and Bellar, 2015). At the same time, Aish as an organization invests resources in creating a web space which not only promotes Judaism but also caters to Jewish religious needs, including news, Torah portions, calendar information, recipes, dating resources, Hebrew lessons, and a Judaica store. Thus, the website becomes a valuable source for both religious and unaffiliated Jews (Aish, 2017).

***National-Religious sect and Kipa.co.il.*** The Israeli Orthodox group that was quick to embrace digital technologies was the “National Religious” (*Dati Leumi*) or “Religious Zionists” (*Dati Tzioni*) group. This group, as the name suggests, has embraced the modern ideology of nationalism and are strong proponents of the existence of a Jewish State. This community believes in many modern values, most prominent of which is nationalism, but they are also more open to other values such as socialism (for some sub-groups), capitalism (for other groups), scientific and technological progress, and to some degree, feminism or a degree of gender equality. They view integration with general Israeli secular society as a positive value (Rosenthal and Ribak, 2015), also the use and advancement of science and technology. This community has a more egalitarian approach toward rabbinical authority. Although rabbis still represent the religious institutions and knowledge, each (male) person is encouraged to study *Halacha* and be the master of his own life/home. The National Religious community in Israel comprises about 10%-20% of the general population (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010). While the majority of National Religious members are united in their conception of

Zionism, they differ slightly in thinking about gender, technology, and other modern values. (For example, only a minority of families encourage girls to join the Israeli army and take leadership roles, while most families encourage girls to take on more domestic jobs, such as teachers or social workers.)

Kipa.co.il was created for this community as a resource. Boaz Nechstern, Kipa's founder, started it as a website for the *mitzvah* of selling leftover bread before Passover. Kipa.co.il was the first Israeli site for the religious community, established as early as 2000. It is, to this day, one of the leading Israeli-Jewish religious websites, with news, shopping, multiple forums, and a tablet application version of the website. The website is not an outreach website *per se*, but rather a website for this religious community. The website represents the National Religious tendency to combine *Torah* and technology, tradition and modernity (Rosenthal and Ribak, 2015). The National Religious community, by and large, accepts modern media in a negotiated fashion – e.g., they have constant online access, but it's restricted through religious internet filters. As Rosenthal and Ribak explain, "The internet is embraced, but not as a free market of ideas [...] rather a restrained and domesticated version that does not transverse the invisible yet articulated cultural boundaries..." (2015, p. 156). One of the struggles of Kipa as a website is to maintain these cultural boundaries while at the same time supporting the variety of opinions in the National Religious community and creating interesting conversations on their website (Golan and Campbell, 2015). According to Campbell and Golan, "Rather than silencing discussions of potentially controversial issues, he [Kipa's CEO] encourages their proliferation because they yield increased web traffic" (2015, p.

479). This “guiding strategy” (Golan and Campbell, 2015) adopted by the website editors allows for the negotiation of communal and religious terms, including gender and sexuality.

The inward negotiation and outward representation of Judaism that happen on these three websites includes negotiating and representing Jewish attitudes towards gender and sexual norms. Thus, these websites are fertile ground for the cultivation of an Orthodox digital discourse on gender and sexuality, in which power (the established traditional, patriarchal, views of gender and sexuality) and resistance (the opposition and questioning of these norms) co-exist. It is this negotiation and construction of gender and sexuality that this dissertation unveils.

### **Judaism, Digital Media and Gender/Sexuality – Dissertation Rationale, Thesis and Contribution**

This dissertation project examines Jewish digital media discourse concerning sexuality and gender. I wish to bring attention to how these concepts are discussed in online Jewish religious environments, namely in the online mainstream websites of three Orthodox Jewish organizations: Chabad, Aish, and Kipa. Via these websites, rabbis and laypeople upload material for religious uses: Q&A, *Torah* lessons, and general articles. These online texts and discussions, I suggest, represent the current digital mainstream worldview of Jewish Orthodoxy. This information is not, however, purely unilateral. Due to the asynchronous nature of online dialogue, there is a quasi-simultaneous

reaction from the community to whom these messages are sent. As a result, space is opened up for an interaction between the religious online users. I propose to analyze the material archived on these websites through the lens of critical feminist discourse analysis to explore how these communities think about and negotiate gender and sexuality. More specifically, the research question leading this investigation is: **How are Jewish orthodox gender and sexuality concepts and norms negotiated and constructed via Orthodox digital discourse?**

As a “how” question, this project highlights a number of discursive strategies and approaches deployed by website authors and users. In the following chapters, I suggest a theoretical and methodological approach that underlines the negotiation and construction of gender and sexual norms in Jewish online discourse by analyzing the digital (technological affordances), the religious, and the discursive strategies themselves. Thus, I developed a theoretical approach and methodological model for this dissertation, which I call a tri-layered critical discourse analysis. This approach suggests that online communication be conceptualized as a Foucauldian discourse, a site of struggle, and that the support mechanisms of this discourse are the technological affordances and the religious (or cultural) background and how it is used. To analyze this discourse, an analysis model is suggested, one that examines these three elements or layers in the discourse: 1) the technological affordances, 2) the religious cultural context, and 3) the discursive strategies. This will be explained in further detail in the methods chapter.

The tri-layered model developed in this dissertation contributes to the study of Digital Religion and the study of gender/sex and the digital in several ways. First, the



approach requires the researcher to examine the technological elements present and what kind of discourse they enable (Participatory? Democratic?). Then, the researcher needs to define what religious (or cultural) elements are being discussed, and how the religious (or cultural) worldview informs the digital discourse. Then the researcher proceeds to highlight the discursive strategies employed in the discourse. This approach allows for a clear, methodical critical analysis of discourses that considers the various elements that inform the discourse. Thus, it will allow researchers of digital religion to examine the digital as a discourse and to do so in a careful and systematic way.

Aside from the contribution of this model, the analysis of this dissertation also highlights specific discursive strategies that might be found useful in other discourses. For example, some of the discursive strategies used to strengthen traditional religious gender worldviews include: supporting religious cultural context with secular or therapeutic terminology, employing the personal voice in maintaining communal norms, and attributing (neoliberal) empowerment and spiritual meaning in traditional gender roles. The conclusion chapter lists a total of twelve discursive strategies. These discursive strategies will be detailed, defined, and supported with examples throughout the analysis chapters and in the conclusion chapter.

Furthermore, this dissertation highlights how the digital enables peer regulation and empowers religious authority and traditions, thus problematizing research on the liberating/democratizing abilities of the Internet and contributing to research that highlights “cultured” or religious use of digital media (Campbell, 2010; Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Toft, 2015). That is, this dissertation provides insight into growing

concerns about the digital as a tool for spreading fundamental and conservative worldviews.

## **Dissertation Structure**

This dissertation begins with a review of scholarship from Digital Religion studies and from Feminist Media studies, presenting the theoretical perspectives framing this study. Following this introduction, Chapter II (literature review) highlights the need to examine religious digital usage as a normalizing discourse, a site of struggle. It also shows that this discourse needs to be inspected by examining both religious worldviews and technological affordances. The third chapter (method) operationalizes this theoretical approach, suggesting a tri-layered methodological model of analysis. It also includes a discussion of the sample. Then, two analysis chapters are offered. Chapter IV explores what I call “Discourse of Practice” – in which material dealing with the practical, legal, *Halachic* language is examined. This is an important first step because in Judaism, a praxis-based religion, the legal discourse reveals much about the existing social and cultural norms and possible shifts within same (Epstein, 1930; Goldman, 1970; Goldish, 2008). The sample for this chapter includes n=60 ask-the-rabbi pages displaying question, answer, and comments/sharing behaviors. The analysis of this chapter reveals a use of the digital to reinforce religious authority and a strict approach to sexual norms. Chapter V examines the “Discourse of Meaning,” the value and connotations gender and sex receive in the Orthodox Jewish online discourse. This

chapter includes material written by lay people, especially women, in which traditional gender norms are supported using secular, personalized (neo-liberal) language. A total of n=48 articles and videos were collected for this chapter, as well as the reactions – n=1103 website comments and Facebook comments. Finally, Chapter VI brings these two discourses together – the Discourse of Practice and the Discourse of Meaning – and discusses the strategies (technological, discursive, or religious) used to negotiate gender and sexual norms in order to highlight the negotiation and construction that takes place in the digital discourse. In this fashion, I closely investigate online Orthodox Jewish approaches to gender and sexuality and how the religious use of digital media strengthens and disrupts them.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW: EXPLORING DIGITAL JUDAISM AS A DISCOURSE

This chapter contextualizes the theoretical approaches and key ideas that will be dealt with in this dissertation project. While the Introduction provided context for Orthodox Judaism and its attitudes towards media and gender, this chapter reviews and contextualizes theories of gender, religion, and digital media. In other words, it answers the question, how do we understand online religious discourse and its relation to gender negotiation and construction? In this chapter, I offer an understanding of digital media as a space of resistance **and** coercion, a sort of **Foucauldian discourse**, a “site of struggle” (Foucault, 2012). This chapter outlines cyber-feminist and cultural studies theories that inform this study and are used to explain what is meant by discourse. Furthermore, after reviewing Digital Religion scholarship, I suggest that online texts as discourse can only be fully understood through an examination of both the technological tools and the cultural-religious worldviews informing the users.

In order to understand Jewish online texts concerning gender and sexuality as a discourse in which both technology and religion matter, this chapter reviews some of the major scholarship related to digital religion and media studies, especially the research of Judaism online from a feminist perspective. First, I consider how to approach digital media by reviewing media studies, and more specifically, feminist media studies and its understanding of media as a tool of power and resistance. The discussion in this section informs my discursive approach, as it explains how gender and sexuality are constantly

constructed and negotiated via media and technology, particularly through the power structures that media technologies support. Second, I discuss how to approach the digital as a space in which religious norms are negotiated. The review of Digital Religion studies supplies the scholarly background to theorizing religion and media technology. Two theoretical approaches inform this study: Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST), from which I draw the importance of understanding the religious context and how religion informs the discourse, and Mediatization of Religion, from which I draw the importance of paying attention to technological affordances and how socio-technological context shapes the discourse. Finally, I review existing scholarship on gender/sex and Judaism online and show how my approach can contribute to it. I then summarize the major takeaways from the review of scholarship and point to how it informs my method and analysis.

### **Media Studies – Understanding the Digital as a Discourse**

This literature review begins with a discussion of how this project understands digital communication, specifically from a feminist perspective. It describes how media use has shaped social notions of gender and sexuality. As will be seen in this review, by understanding communication technology as a tool for power and resistance, we can think of the digital as a “space” in which people negotiate gender and sexual norms. I suggest that a helpful way to conceptualize digital communication is as a **discourse**, a site of struggle. This discourse can only be fully understood, I argue, by analyzing the

“support mechanisms” (Mills, 1997), i.e., technological affordances and religious worldviews. This section explains theorizing digital communication as a discourse while the next section (digital religion) will expand on understanding religion and media.

In the last thirty years, technological advancement has accelerated at a pace so overwhelming developments have been called revolutionary almost every other year. The digital revolution, information revolution, mobile revaluation, and other advancements in communication technologies have been broadly titled “new media” or “digital media.” Digital media in this dissertation are defined as communication accessed through electronic and digital computers, especially communication online – i.e., the Internet – but can also refer to any other digital media communication technologies. Digital mMedia tend to include diverse and malleable media (from ebooks to video vines); thus, digital media can be thought of as a “meta-medium” (Finnemann, 2011). One basic and important characteristic of this medium is that it “integrate[s] the storage capacities of print media with the transmission speed of electronic media” (Finnemann, 2011, p. 83). The electronic and storage capacities allow for asynchronous and constant communication. Furthermore, in the digital age media creation is considered more participatory and interactive, and therefore, more democratic. It is more democratic and participatory because the Internet is open; any user can create and upload content, interact with other users and companies, blog, react, post, and repost. This means people have more avenues in which to voice their opinions, and more access to participate in the creation and distribution of media, which naturally destabilizes existing power structures of media production and distribution and grants more power to

individuals and communities (Jenkins, 2006). However, even in this participatory culture, traditional power and authority structures are still present and influential. Specifically patriarchal and religious power structures, I argue, operate through digital media to maintain their status. The interaction between feminist studies and ICT studies explores how digital media's characteristics influence and are influenced by gender politics.

*Gender and digital media.* When computer technologies, cyber-space, and web 1.0 first emerged, feminist scholars wondered if this virtual space might be the place where identity could become flexible and playful, where gender norms could be bent, where hegemonic patriarchal power structures could be resisted. Sadie Plant considered the digital revolution a moment of a genderquake, as well – a revolution of sexual and gender relations in which “all the old expectations, stereotypes, senses of identity and security faced challenges...” (1997, p. 37). According to Plant, the advances in computer technology have been, from the beginning, signs of the sexual revolution, as well; thus, feminist progress and technological progress can be seen as interconnected. Technology and media have changed the structure of traditional gender relations by, for example, representing women on television in a multiplicity of ways; they have also impacted sexual norms – e.g., the development of contraception or wide access to pornography. As argued by Meyrowitz (1986), electronic media have profoundly changed notions of masculinity and femininity and the spheres in which they interact. Donna Haraway similarly suggested that new technologies could bend gender binaries:

Certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women,

people of color, nature, workers, animals... chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/ nature... **High-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways.** It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what is body in machines that resolve into coding practices. (1991, p. 177, my emphasis)

However, the reality of power in digital media is far more complicated, and although some power structures have fractured, it is worth noting many traditional power structures have survived. According to Anne Balsamo, “Technologies of the body not only manipulate alterity, but also reproduce it. Sexual differences are both the input and the output of the technological production of the gendered bodies...” (1996, p. 159). In her 1996 book *Technologies of the gendered body: Reading Cyborg Women*, Balsamo examines the complex relationship between technology and gender. She states, technology is created in line with current social norms about gender, and therefore technology is used to replicate and enforce those norms. Although Balsamo accepts that technology has an impact on society, she limits that impact to only what the designers of the technology- the shapers – intended that output to be. In Balsamo’s understanding of the relationship between society and technology, it is existing societal norms that shape technology, and not the other way around. On this account, it seems that the same new technologies that have the potential to break the binary, are just as likely to empower it. As Jodi O’Brien shows in her study of gender in online chats:

...[G]ender is a dominant, shared social construction that constitutes a primary symbolic form around which we organize interaction. Despite the hype of cyberspace as “unmarked” territory, we are nonetheless mapping this frontier with the same social categories of distinction that we have used to chart modern reality – which we tend to code as based in a state



of nature. (1996, p. 86)

That is, even in moments and places where the technology allows for an escape from gender norms, the construction of gender is so pivotal to our understanding of ourselves, others, and society at large, that we (re)enforce it. Even when modern tools are provided “...they do not necessarily disrupt ‘traditional’ notions of gender...” (Wallis, 2013, p. 88). The important assumption made here, and reaffirmed throughout scholarship on media technology and gender, is that “technology is never neutral and always works as a form of knowledge and power” (Wallis, 2013, p. 89). Furthermore, Web 2.0 and especially virtual and social gaming online have become spaces of extreme sexism and chauvinism (Fahs and Gohr, 2012). I suggest this is mostly because digital media are not just tools for change, experimentation and resistance, but online engagement is concurrently by-and-large used to maintain and intensify hegemonic power (Harrison, 2010). Thus, it is the work of feminist scholars of media and ICTs to explore how media and technology impact/are impacted by gender roles and sexual norms, to question and illuminate the power structures these technologies support, and to explain them. In sum, gender studies scholarship views media as a force that influences society’s understanding of gender and sexual norms. In other words, media can be used to resist or enforce traditional gender norms. One theoretical way to understand “resistance and power” is to conceptualize digital media itself as a form of Foucauldian discourse. This conceptualization will be further explained in the following subsection.

***The digital as a discourse.*** As can be seen from the review so far, media at large and digital media specifically play an important part in feminist thought, both as

perpetrators of hegemonic gender behavior and as places/tools for resistance. Given the participatory affordances, digital media especially have been theorized as tools useful for liberation and negotiation of gender and sexual norms and narratives. However, digital media have also been presented as tools used to intensify gender normativity and regulate “correct” sexual behavior. I would argue it is precisely this tension between liberation and regulation that can be thought of as a tangible version of Foucault’s discourse.

Not every form of conversation can be classified as Foucauldian discourse, but rather systematic statements and practices that aim to define, produce, or regulate a certain term or structure. According to Pentzold and Seidenglanz, “discursive practices are delimiting the field of objects, defining a legitimate perspective and fixing the norms for the elaboration of concepts” (2006, p. 62). That is, discourse is understood as an epistemological power structure that works to maintain, for example, traditional gender and sexual norms. In other words, discourses are “ways of constituting knowledge” (Weedon, 1987), and they allow for both domination and resistance. Therefore, the tension present in the discourse highlights the negotiation and construction of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, digital media allow the creation of tangible discourse, because in the case of digital technology the discourse is public and archived, stored, and quickly transmitted, thus making it possible for the feminist researcher to closely examine and analyze the negotiation and construction of gender norms that takes place in online communication.

Understanding digital media as discourse means theorizing digital communication – in this dissertation theorizing Jewish Orthodox websites as a set of systematic statements and online practices that create, construct, and negotiate Jewish gender and sexual norms. Digital communication technology is theorized in many different ways: as participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006); as a social network (Rainie and Wellman, 2012); as a communal space (Donath, 1999; Hutchings, 2011, 2013); as a tool, place or environment (Markham, 1998, 2004; Tsuria et al., 2017). What is unique in conceptualizing the Internet as discourse is that this lens does not view the digital from the perspective of the individual (how one uses it to create social relations or collect information), but rather examines the digital as a structure, an “institution” to which users contribute and in which they partake. It also differs from viewing the digital as a networked society (Castells, 2000; Van Dijk, 2012), because while these theories pay attention to society as a whole, their main foci are on the organizational and material aspects now networked because of the digital (such as businesses or SNS), and less on the cultural discourses the digital creates and maintains. The usefulness of Foucault and his notion of discourse has been recognized in digital media studies and used to investigate the construction of online identity (Aycock, 1995); information systems (Stahl, 2004); Wikipedia’s knowledge structures (Pentzold and Seidenglanz, 2006); internet archeology and genealogy (Jarrett, 2003; Goddard, 2015; Parikka, 2012; Harrison, 2010); and even “e-religion” (Karaflogka, 2014). While these studies use Foucault in various ways, the common underlying assumption is that through the digital, knowledge and power are constructed, negotiated, and maintained. This is a helpful

approach for the aim of this dissertation, which is focused on the negotiation of norms.

Furthermore, discourse is helpful in analyzing patriarchy from a cultural perspective. As argued by Walby:

Patriarchal culture is best analyzed as a set of discourses which are institutionally-rooted [...] Religions have historically been very important patriarchal discourses, laying down correct forms for men and for women. [...] Discourses on femininity and masculinity are institutionalized in all sites of social life, not only in those institutions such as religions, media and education, which have cultural production as a central goal. (1989, p. 222)

As observed by Walby, both religion and media are institutions that produce and maintain gender discourses. However, this is not only a historical phenomenon, but also one currently taking place through digital media. It is by theorizing religious digital media as a discourse in which patriarchal structures are maintained and resisted that we can explore this current phenomenon in depth. To summarize, while there are various ways of theorizing digital media (as a network, as a space, etc.), in this dissertation I suggest conceptualizing digital media as a Foucauldian discourse, a site of struggle in which power and resistance operate. The next subsection briefly reviews power in the context of technology, religion, and gender.

***Power, authority, gender, and digital media.*** Power can be understood in many ways, including access to wealth and decision making; the ability to force and control; or the ability to lead, impose, and/or resist social norms. Power, and specifically patriarchal power and the hegemony's power to correct gender behaviors, has been a focus of study for feminist scholars (De Beauvoir, 1952; Hooks, 2004; Tickner, 2001). For centuries, the social structures in our societies have been created by and controlled by men. Take

for example the Christian church, which gave privileges and authority to men as leaders, as religious clergy, and even as heads of their households (Brown and Bohn, 1989). In the last two centuries social and technological changes have shifted the sources of power and authority, at least to a certain extent. However, patriarchal structures still exist and are, in many ways, dominant. One of the ways patriarchal structures maintain their power is through normalizing discourses, a process that takes place in social institutions (such as school), in daily conversations, and through the media.

Power in this dissertation is understood as operating through discourse – that is, power is theorized in the Foucauldian sense of power rather than the Marxist one. According to Foucault, power does not only operate via brute force, coercion, or state-enforced ideology, but also through a mainstream discourse and the creation of a mental panopticon (Foucault, 1988). Within the creation and maintenance of the discourse, each individual has a certain amount of agency and power, but centralized social institutions (such as schools, churches, or the media) tend to enjoy the highest level of influence because they are understood as sources of **authority**.

These institutions and structures of power were conceptualized further in Foucault's later writings as **governmentality**: a way understand power and authority in liberal modernities. According to Foucault, modern societies are governed by the creation of institutions, procedures and mental strategies in their population that construct specific types of actions (Foucault, 1991). Governmentality examines how various authoritative actors work to shape societal choices, needs and aspirations. In

other words, governmentality explores how “power is productively and diffusely harnessed in the governance of others and the self.” (Wallis, 2013a, p. 334).

There are various ways in which governmentality operates in micro- and macro-processes of power, but the aspect that is most useful to this dissertation is its role in creating a “subjective self” that craves to maintain the existing religious gender and sexual norms. By crafting people’s subjectivity in specific ways, state and non-state actors encourage individuals to behave in ways that reflect that subjectivity. As explained by Nicholas Rose: “The self is to be a subjective self... to interpret reality and destiny as matters of individual responsibility, [the self finds] meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice.” (1992, 142). These acts of choice, however, are not dependent on individual autonomy, but are instead part of the structures of power. Rose goes on to explain how Foucault ties ‘practices bearing on the self’ to a ‘form of power’ through the concept of governmentality:

...Foucault conceives of power as that which traverses all practices – from the ‘macro’ to the ‘micro’ – through which persons are ruled, mastered, held in check, administered, steered, guided, by means of which they are led by others or have come to direct or regulate their own actions. (1992, 143)

Governmentality thus brings into the notion of power not only ‘macro’ explicitly defined institutions but also “the diverse techniques that are deployed to produce subjects” (Wallis, 2013a, p. 345). In Judaism, for example, the macro level of Rabbinical Courts and *Halachic* textual authority represent institutional power. A study that concentrated solely on this power would explore how gender and sexuality are enforced top-down. However, as I argue in this dissertation in accord with the insights of Foucault, power can also be observed to operate through the micro level by, for example, creating the

discursive strategies that produce subjects who understand themselves as “divine” females or by framing housework as joyful and empowering. This dissertation examines how power (in the shape of gender and sexual norms) operates, is enforced, and is negotiated through technologies of the self as mediated by digital technologies.

Governmentality works through encouraging internalization and surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Foucault uses the architectural metaphor of a prison panopticon to provide a visual image of his theory on how power relations and surveillance work. Instead of prison guards constantly checking on each prisoner by walking between the cells, prisons can build a panopticon. Through this central tower, the guards can randomly observe in whichever direction they choose, and are able to watch each prisoner without that prisoner’s knowledge. The prisoner, then, under the fear of being constantly watched, begins internalizing this type of surveillance, monitoring their own behavior without being forced to doing so. Therefore, using the metaphorical concept of the panopticon, Foucault argues that power can be internalized by the regulated individuals who then take an “active” part in their own surveillance.

This understanding of power through self-regulation is important when examining examples of online religious discourse dealing with issues of gender and sexuality. It suggests an examination of the construction of gender and sexuality via discourse. According to Williams et al., “Gender roles are shared cultural expectations that are placed on individuals on the basis of their socially defined gender” (2009, p. 702). Gender roles and expectations are thus formed and regulated through social and cultural practices, representations, and narratives. Feminist research uncovers these

forms of gender regulation via hegemonic discourse (Butler, 1990; Rodino, 1997; Bartsky, 1988). According to Bartsky:

Foucault has argued that the transition from traditional to modern societies has been characterized by a profound transformation in the exercise of power [...] In modern societies [...] Power now seeks to transform the minds of those individuals who might be tempted to resist it, not merely to punish or imprison their bodies. [...] Women have their own experience of the modernization of power, one which begins later but follows in many respects the course outlined by Foucault. [...] The disciplinary power that is increasingly charged with the production of a properly embodied Femininity is dispersed and anonymous [...] invested in everyone and in no one in particular. (1988, p. 79-80)

Bartsky used Foucauldian notions of power to show how the female body is surveilled and made docile, subordinate to the male. She went on to show in her work how media, specifically magazines, act as a disciplinary force in the discourse of gender and sexuality. This conception of disciplinary power as “invested in everyone and in no one in particular” is how, I suggest, we can view digital media as well. Media and communication technologies can be and have been understood both as regulators and panopticons (Andrejevic, 2006; Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015; Fuchs, 2009), as well as a space for individuals to negotiate and partake in the creation of the discourse (Albrechtslund, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). To conclude this subsection, in the context of religion and gender power is understood to work through discourse. The discourse becomes more tangible, visual, and constantly available through digital media. Thus, examining the negotiation and construction of gender and sexual norms on digital media is to examine how (Foucauldian) power operates in this religious digital context.



This review highlights the positioning of communication technology as a tool/space in which our understanding of gender and sexuality is shaped. That is, as subjects, we use the Internet as a site of information seeking to understand social norms – what is a “right” or “wrong” behavior. And if we as researchers theorize the digital as a “tangible” or “fossilized” **discourse**, it can be used to track and examine the “archaeology of now” (Harrison, 2010) – i.e., the ways in which current trends and behaviors become normalized. In the case of digital media and religion, technology plays an instrumental part by expanding the reach and access of religious communities. By doing so, digital media allow conceptions of gender to be explored and questioned. That is, a religious individual could use digital media conduits to search for sexual or gender interpretations differing from those within their religious community. Or, they could use religious digital media spaces to anonymously question religious authority and raise issues for communal discussion. Digital media can also (re)affirm traditional views on gender and sexuality. Through online religious spaces, or various religious mobile applications, religious individuals, communities, and institutions can encourage traditional behaviors. For example, a mobile application like J-date allows people to date within the Jewish religion. A website like asktherabbi.com allows individuals anonymous, ongoing access to rabbis, and allows rabbis to constantly and publicly confirm religious norms. These seemingly binary possibilities of digital media – to liberate and regulate or to affirm and/or question authority – are in fact part of the construction of the religious discourse on gender and sexuality. As noted above, a Foucauldian approach to power considers how individuals and institutions negotiate and

manifest their positions through an ongoing discourse. I therefore expand on a Foucauldian-based understanding of power, as it translates into “real” technologies and technologies of the self. In other words, I wish to explore the ways individuals use technologies that/to shape gender and sexual perspectives, and identify ways they engage with these technologies to change, maintain, and negotiate these perspectives. Understanding digital media as a site of struggle, we must further consider what elements constitute this discourse. I suggest that in the case of an online religious discourse, we need to examine all three words that make up this phrase – the online (technology), the religious, and the discourse. So far, I have reviewed how to understand the online as a discourse; the next section explores how to understand the relationship between religion and communication technology.

### **Digital Religion – Understanding Discourse in Terms of Technology and Religion**

This section provides a brief overview of the development of the study of religion online, focusing on the theoretical tools developed in this field and how they contribute to this study. The focus of this section is on two theories within Digital Religion studies – Religious Social Shaping of Technology and Mediatization of Religion – which provide helpful perspectives for studying the negotiation of religious gender norms online in this study. They offer ways to understand how religious individuals use the media for religious purposes, as well as how the media allow for specific media logics and affordances. This is important because the ways media are

used for the construction of religious gender norms and meanings is informed, I argue, both by religious cultural background and by media affordances. Therefore, in order to understand gender and sexuality as religious norms constructed and negotiated online, the analysis must also consider the religious and technological contexts they operate in.

*The study of digital religion.* As the Internet became more widely used in the Western world through the late 1980's and the 1990's, scholars began to ask themselves about the impact of this new technology on individuals and social institutions such as the school, the family, the government, and the church. This field of study is conceptualized as "Digital Religion," and it explores the "evolution of religious practices online which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously" (Campbell, 2013, p. 1). The study of religion and digital media can be articulated in four waves of research, as suggested by Heidi Campbell and Mia Lovheim (2011): The first wave is considered the "descriptive wave," in which scholars began to illustrate this new phenomenon of religion online. Academic articles in this wave included descriptions of online religious behavior, texts, rituals, and communities. Researchers in this wave tended to see religion online as a separate, new form of religious participation (see, *Give Me that Online Religion*, Brasher, 2004) or as an immigration of religious practices from the offline to the online (see for instance, O'Leary's [1996] article, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space"). The second wave started the categorization of the information collected, in which scholars began to note trends and create typologies. Individual users' religious identity construction online, as well as the authenticity of the online experience, were some of the main motivating questions. New religious movements cultivated by the 1990-2000's

Internet (Web 1.0) were explored alongside more traditional religions. The third wave more clearly dealt with theoretical questions, and was therefore considered the “theoretical turn.” As the Internet became less of a “cyberspace” and more of a mundane medium, scholars began observing the ways religious groups and individuals negotiate their relationship with these new media. In this wave, we also find comparative work between religious traditions, as well as studies of spirituality. The fourth and current wave in the field of Digital Religion is more focused on exploring the daily religious use of digital technology, with a focus on identity, community, and especially religious authority. Studies in this wave include exploring religious iTunes applications (Campbell et al., 2014; Wagner, 2012), religious games or religious symbolism in video games (Sisler, 2008), religious internet memes (Bellar et al., 2015), etc. As can be seen from these examples, more nuanced attention is being given to the specific medium, its affordances, and how it is used by religious individuals. This current wave also displays an array of intersectional studies, which combine the study of Digital Religion with questions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and nationality. This dissertation reflects this wave by asking questions that concern identity, authority, and community. However, it is unique and contributes to this current wave by theorizing identity, authority, and community through the lens of discursive power. That is, this dissertation explores the construction of communal norms and the negotiation of authority and gender identity through digital discourse, highlighting the digital as a site of struggle. Discourse has been used in the study of religion online as a framing tool for how/why religious users understand digital media (Campbell, 2016; Howard, 2011) or by using critical discourse

analysis as a method (Midden and Ponzanesi, 2013; Bryan and Albakry, 2016). This dissertation project expands the use of discourse in the study of digital religion and ties it more profoundly to the Foucauldian sense of discourse. While Foucault has been used in the study of contemporary religion to theorize authority/power (Carrette, 2013) and gender/sex (Motha, 2007), his theories are rarely used in the study of digital religion. This project also hopes to contribute to this current wave by strengthening the intersectional turn, implementing questions concerning gender and sexuality within the study of Jewish religion online.

***Theories of digital religion.*** The literature on religion and media deals not only with phenomenology, or describing religious uses of media, but also with theory, or explaining the relationship between media and religion. Knut Lundby (2013) provided a well-explained review of the main theoretical stances in the study of online religion. According to Lundby (2013), five main theoretical stances can be found in the study of religion and media: Technological Determinism, Mediatization of Religion, Mediation of Religion, Mediation of Sacred Forms, and Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST). For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus only on Mediatization and RSST, as they provide what I consider the most helpful tools for understanding how religious negotiation works at the meso-level of the community and tradition. That is, both Mediatization and RSST are helpful because they consider the complicated social-technological contexts in which Digital Religion takes place and are concerned with religious communities/institutions. Paying attention to these contexts is pivotal, I argue, for understanding the negotiations that take place within religious

communities/institutions. In contrast, Mediation of Religion and Mediation of Sacred Forms are helpful when trying to understand personal spiritual consumption, representation of religion via the media, or the ways media and religion are interconnected. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is more important to understand the “religious” and the “technological” as two forces that together inform the discourse, as elements in the negotiation of religious gender and sexual norms.

Mediatization is a more nuanced version of the technological determinism explicitly articulated in Stig Hjarvard’s book *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (2013). Unlike technological determinism, which sees every technology as a determining force, Hjarvard’s mediatization theory focuses on the influence of media in the 20th and 21st centuries, in societies that live in highly-technological, highly-modern surroundings. Hjarvard claimed that in those societies media industries operate as social institutions. That is, media industries are organizations that inform or establish norms of social behavior. Furthermore, media as social institutions are increasingly gaining power. His theory about the Mediatization of Religion, therefore, claimed that these media institutions are replacing religious institutions, or that existing religious institutions begin to function using “media logics.” According to Hjarvard: “The overall outcome of the mediatization of religion is not a new kind of religion as such, but rather a new social condition in which the power to define and practice religion has changed” (2013, p. 10). The way we understand religion, according to Hjarvard, is preconditioned by media logics. Media logics are the scripts and ways of behavior that media creates and promotes (for example, online media logic “invites” interactivity). According to

Hjarvard, media logic can be “understood as a conceptual short hand for the various institutional, aesthetic, and technological *modus operandi* of the media, including the ways in which the media distribute material and symbolical resources, and operate with the help of formal and informal rules” (2013, p. 17). Another useful term from this perspective is the concept of technological affordances. Hjarvard suggested we consider James Gibson’s concept of affordance to understand how a technology’s structure might determine its possible uses. Trying to maintain agency of users and not step into technological determinism, Hjarvard argued that although “the affordances of any given object make certain actions possible, they exclude others and structure the interaction between the actor and user” (2013, p. 27). We must also recognize that in the design stages, a media technology is “open for a variety of social and cultural influences” (2013, p. 28). Digital media, like other communication technologies, have both certain media logics (“internet culture,” Porter, 1997) and technological affordances. Technological affordances can inform media logics – for example, hyperlinks might create a media logic which is ahistorical, context-free (Castells, 2000); or as discussed later in this dissertation, anonymity online can lead to a greater tendency to ask about taboo issues (Gottenman, 2009).

Heidi Campbell’s Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) claims that we should pay attention to the way society shapes technology, rather than the other way around (Campbell, 2010; Lundby, 2013). Coming from the tradition of ICT studies, Social Shaping of Technology is a theory adapted by Campbell to address religious users and uses. Within the theory of The Social Shaping of Technology, “Technology is seen

as a social process, and the possibility is recognized that social groups may shape technologies towards their own ends, rather than the character of the technology determining use and outcomes” (Campbell, 2010, p. 50). SST considers how technologies are created, shaped, used, and negotiated in the societies that make and employ them. This process happens during the invention, creation, application, and appropriation of the technology by the human individuals involved. SST further stresses “the negotiability of technology and highlighting the scope for particular groups and forces to shape technologies to their ends...” (Williams and Edge, 1996, p. 867). Campbell combined SST with religious studies to highlight the specificity of how religious groups negotiate technology, a process she called Religious Social Shaping of Technology. According to Campbell, this theory “takes into account the factors informing a religious community’s responses to new media – their relationship to community, authority, and text – and combines it with a social shaping approach that highlights the practices surrounding technology evaluation” (2010, p. 41-42). This theoretical approach offers an in-depth exploration of both religion and technology and views their interactions as processes of combined social factors instead of combating ones.

RSST is a theoretical approach and method. It argues the necessity of and urges researchers to ask questions “about how technologies are conceived of, as well as used, in light of a religious community’s beliefs, moral codes, and historical tradition of engagement with other forms of media technology” (Campbell, 2010, p. 59). While this dissertation does not fully employ RSST as a method, it does consider specific religious



context as highly important for understanding the online negotiation of gender and sexuality norms. That is, RSST contributes to this dissertation by insisting on the investigation of traditional Jewish beliefs and moral codes concerning both gender and technology as part of the aspects that construct this discourse.

In order to answer the research question of this dissertation, which is focused on negotiating gender through online religious discourse, both the religious worldviews and the technological affordances that allow this negotiation must be carefully considered. I suggest combining RSST with Mediatization of Religion allows for a theoretical framework that considers both religious worldviews and technological/media “logics.” This combination, I argue, helps one conduct a nuanced research, and is especially useful in the case of researching the complicated topics of gender and sexuality. As argued in Mia Lövheim’s recently published article (2016), “a focus on gender brings out how mediatization of religion is a contextualized process, where the outcomes of the general tendencies suggested by Hjarvard vary depending on the interplay between **the particular form of media** and the **religious setting**” (2016, p. 24, my emphasis). Lövheim suggested that an exploration of gender negotiation demands that we pay attention to both the form of media and the religious setting. Therefore, although these two approaches are in opposition regarding, for example, the shaping of technology process – where RSST argues that religious communities shape technology, and mediatization claims that technology as a social institution shapes society – I argue that combining these approaches creates a holistic approach. To be more concrete, each of these approaches helps in theorizing the Orthodox digital discourse: RSST calls attention

to the religious cultural context used in the discourse. Mediatization of Religion, in contrast, draws attention to the technological affordances/media logics and the types of discourse they enable. RSST thus informs the analysis of the religious cultural context, and Mediatization of Religion the analysis of the technological affordances. We need to consider both processes: the religious cultural context and how it informs religious uses of technology, as well as the logics and affordances of the media and how these logics and affordances impact religious uses of technology. I suggest we think about this as an ecosystem in which media/technology and religion/culture are two forces which, in different ways, shape our lives, our worldviews, the ways we use technology, and the ways we understand our religions. That is, each of these theories informs a different layer of the analysis – Mediatization of Religion informs the investigation of the technological aspects and how users employ them; RSST informs the inquiry into the religious tradition, worldview, and terminology users bring with them into the digital discourse. This idea will be developed further in the method chapter.

Throughout this dissertation these approaches inform my analysis of the data: I consider, on the one hand, the religious history, traditions, and norms informing a certain religious discussion or behavior and on the other hand, the affordances and logics of the specific medium being used. This includes: 1. Reviewing and considering the religious and cultural aspects related to a topic. What are the religious norms regarding discussions and arguments? What are the historical attitudes towards a specific sexual behavior? What are the social norms regarding this topic? 2. Examining certain media for the affordances they have. Can the users react? Comment? Share? Are there

audio/visual aspects to the discourse? I believe these two theories in conjunction can help us explore how Jewish religious individuals, informed by their religious traditions, authority, and community structures, use digital media and how that interaction, based on the affordances of the medium, might construct their religious concepts and behaviors.

Thus, I suggest a theoretical approach that begins by conceptualizing the Internet as a discourse, then insists this discourse exists in a technological medium and is informed by cultural/religious worldviews. By considering all three – discourse, medium, and religion – we are better set to understand the construction and negotiation of gender and sexuality in Jewish online texts. The next section reviews previous scholarly approaches in literature about Jewish gender and sexuality online, and problematizes some of the assumptions made in this literature.

### **Jewish Sexuality and Gender Online: Problematizing the “Liberating” Assumptions**

While the introduction to this dissertation supplied context about Jewish Orthodox attitudes towards media and sexuality, this section reviews scholarly literature that examines issues of gender, Judaism, and digital media. I begin by briefly outlining the themes brought up in this scholarship, and then show how while these themes are diverse, they have a common thread – i.e., previous scholarship seemed to understand power through Weberian authority instead of a Foucauldian one, and thus digital media

were viewed as tools for liberation and empowerment, instead of as a discourse, in which power, regulation, and resistance operate. I then conclude by suggesting the contribution of this study to existing literature, specifically by arguing the Internet is not only a “liberating tool” but also one in which power and religious enforcement are enacted.

The study of gender, Judaism, and digital media can be divided to a few themes: attitudes toward female use of digital technology, digital technology as a tool for female empowerment, and digital technology as a space to voice and explore divergent sexualities. More specifically, when looking at how Orthodox women use the Internet, scholars showed how women use it for empowerment and negotiation (Baumel-Schwartz, 2009; Lev-On and Shahar, 2011; Shahar and Lev-On, 2013). Some scholars particularly explored instances in which ultra-Orthodox women use the Internet of necessity (for work), in which case the women tend to provide an apologetic perspective (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005; Livio and Tenenboim, 2007). Other studies looked at how epistemic rabbinical authority is challenged by women using digital media tools (Raucher, 2015; Pitkowsky, 2011; Baumel-Schwartz, 2013). Lastly, a few studies examined sexual deviance explored in ultra-Orthodox forums (Thoebald, 2012; Gottesman, 2009). As can be seen from this list, many of the previous studies examined what women do once they are online and how they negotiate their use of digital media. As such, they dealt with the issue of religious authority within the community. Authority in these studies was conceptualized in a Weberian sense, rather than a Foucauldian one. In this dissertation, authority and power are conceptualized not as a top-down process,

but as a discursive negotiation of meaning, as theorized earlier in this chapter. Thus, this research suggests a new conception of gender negotiation in the study of Digital Judaism – a negotiation that takes place through Foucauldian discourse. The following section reviews existing literature on gender/sexuality and Judaism online, and how this study contributes to this literature.

In this dissertation project, instead of asking how religious women negotiate authority, I ask how they negotiate their understanding of **what it means to be a man/woman**. My investigation is about the construction and negotiation of gender and sexual norms through the use of digital media tools and spaces. Theobald (2012) came closest to asking similar questions, but his work focused only on sexuality. He also examined online places of deviance (homosexuality, “diverse sexual practices”) – i.e., forums used by individuals on the periphery of these communities. In contrast, this dissertation examines typical issues of gender and sexuality (heterosexual relationships) and their construction in the online mainstream discourse. I propose we look not only at digital media as a space in which women can negotiate authority or where peripheral religious individuals can find their voice, but also as a tool for constructing, negotiating, and (re)enforcing communal religious understandings of correct sexualities and normalized gender behavior.

***Previous scholarship: Digital media as liberating.*** While the media’s ability to reinforce traditional gender norms in Judaism has been discussed in relation to electronic media such as film (Rosenthal, 2013) and audio cassettes (Fader, 2009), most research regarding digital, networked media tended to highlight the liberating, democratizing

abilities of the medium. In order to argue for a challenge to authority via digital media, many of these studies highlighted the liberating possibilities afforded by Internet use. For example, Avi Lev-On and Rivka Shahar carefully showed how the use of even a closed forum for only ultra-Orthodox women might allow for an opening of views and the creation of empowering relationships:

Ultra-Orthodox women form online relationships, but most of them are only with other ultra-Orthodox women. Still, the Internet enables them to form relationships that they wouldn't have made otherwise. Even if many of these relationships are work-oriented and legitimate unto themselves, the participants still have here a novel opening to acquainting the non-ultra-Orthodox world... Will the encounter between traditional community and modern technology cause and/or accelerate the changes happening in the ultra-Orthodox Israeli community? This question remains, for now, open. (2011, "conclusion," para. 3, 4)

This citation demonstrates the scholarly conclusion that Internet use facilitates liberating discussions, allowing ultra-Orthodox women to connect with others and to acquire access to the external society. Lev-On and Shahar asked here and in their later work (2013), how do religious women negotiate Internet use in their lives, and what possible changes for the ultra-Orthodox society could this use facilitate? It seems that this research made positive assumptions about the use of digital media as a place of interactivity and participation, a liberating tool, focusing on challenging authority and creating access to information for ultra-Orthodox women through Internet use.

This notion of the Internet as a liberating tool was also highlighted in Simon Theobald's work. In his study, Theobald (2012) shared a case in point of Orthodox individuals using the Internet to negotiate sexuality. In his research of LGBTQI websites and online support groups, he claimed that, "Orthodox community members have used

digital technologies to step outside the narrow confines of communal control and create ‘safe spaces’ for the exploration of non-hegemonic sexual practices and sexualities...” (p. 289). Theobald showed how the Internet is used by Jewish community members for experimentation with sexual identity by openly asking questions and imagining scenarios, while maintaining community boundaries by staying in “digital enclaves” limited by language (Yiddish) and content (Jewish terminologies and community topics).

Looking at a similarly restricted digital enclave, Judith Baumel-Schwartz (2009, 2013) examined ultra-Orthodox women’s forums. Her research was not focused on the technological affordances of new media, but rather on the historical and cultural trends scholars can extract from this material. However, she did offer initial thoughts about the potential role these forums play in shaping communal trends related to gender:

...it appears that the Internet forums of OJW serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they echo and mirror major social, educational and religious trends affecting the Orthodox and Haredi Jewish communities today. On the other hand, they play a role in shaping and reshaping these trends... By allowing dissenting voices to be heard, albeit anonymously, they act as a safe arena in which posters can express their true personal and gendered selves... On the individual level, these factors have a dynamic potential impact on the development of the Orthodox Jewish female self. On the communal level, they have the potential of slowly changing the form and nature of the Orthodox Jewish world. (2009, p. 25)

In a later article, Baumel-Schwartz (2013) continued to research these forums as ways of learning about the world of Orthodox women, and specifically how they use these forums to “reinvent” tradition. According to Baumel-Schwartz, although the creators and users of these forums think of them as places where one can learn how to act correctly, “these fascinating discussions are indicative of how each and every member is at one

and the same time participant and observer, **partners in the social production** of Jewish religious boundaries, belief, and praxis in the contemporary Jewish world” (2013, p. 48, emphasis mine). That is, Baumel-Schwartz placed these women as active prosumers of religious content and ideology. This may be true, although one wonders if this social and cultural production will impact the patriarchal religious authority of these societies, especially if these authority figures will remain the gatekeepers of (legal/*Halachic*) knowledge. Similarly, Michelle Pitkowsky (2011) showed the possibility of liberating Jewish religious women through their use of online Q&A. In her article Pitkowsky reviewed questions sent to rabbis in the last century and compared offline questions to online ones: “I argue that the Internet has in a sense changed the rules of the game by allowing women almost unbridled access to rabbinic authority” (p. 134). She is aware that gatekeepers still exist (they are, after all, asking male rabbis), but claimed that this gatekeeping is reduced due to the participatory nature and easy access allowed by new media technologies. Pitkowsky’s praise of the liberating power of the Internet is clear throughout her article.

Thus, the approach dominant in these articles is that the online Jewish discourse related to gender and sexuality is challenging traditional structures and positively empowering female resistance. Online Jewish religious Q&As, forums, and other spaces in which discourse on sexuality and gender occurs have generally been conceived in academic scholarship as liberating spaces. In this dissertation, I hope to problematize these assumptions by highlighting the regulatory uses in these digital media spaces and the negotiation processes of power and resistance. This dissertation contributes to the



themes of negotiation of authority by expanding the concept of authority and power to denote self-regulation and normative speech. The theoretical framework discussed in this chapter helps explain the construction and negotiation of gender and sexuality online as it offers a way of thinking of the digital as **discourse**, as a place of power and resistance. Examining the material from a feminist media studies perspective, this dissertation also complicates current scholarly conclusions by asking questions related to shifting terminologies and how gender and sexuality as terms and norms are (re)negotiated and constructed online.

## **Summary**

This chapter provides a review of both religious studies and feminist approaches to communication technology. Through the lenses of these two different fields I examine how communication technologies are used to construct, inform, regulate, and destabilize cultural practices and worldviews. More specifically, this review informs the dissertation project by understanding Orthodox digital discourse as a discourse in which religious gender and sexuality norms are regulated and resisted. That is, when thinking about communication technology – and specifically the Internet – as a site of struggle, where discourses in which both power and resistance are enacted, we can begin to examine the social processes of negotiating and constructing sexual and gender norms through verbal interactions. This important assertion stands as the guiding principle of this dissertation.

As I examine how gender and sexuality are constructed and negotiated in online Jewish discourse, I keep in mind a few additional theoretical considerations.

First, inspired by critical and feminist media theories, and specifically the work of Michel Foucault, I consider the digital as a **discourse**, in which Orthodox gender and sexual norms are systematically defined, enforced, and resisted. That is, digital media are understood as a site of power and resistance, in which norms and concepts are confirmed, rejected, and negotiated; therefore, I am not arguing for a clear binary, but a complicated ongoing process of negotiation.

Second, following the RSST approach, I consider specific religious context and user choices, focusing on lived religious experiences as they are communicated via digital technology. That is, I examine the material as a product of this specific religious tradition, supplying historical and sociological information about these communities and examining their media usage as part of their religious practice.

Third, informed by Mediatization theory, I pay close attention to media logics and affordances inherent in the websites – including, for example, the ability to comment, share, interact – and show how the media logics inform the various ways in which users communicate about their religious negotiation of gender and sexual norms.

These key ideas help construct and inform the discourse analysis performed in this dissertation. As can be noted from this literature review, I assume that the use of communication technology has the power to mirror and shape our perspectives of the world. However, that use is always already informed by the ideologies and cultural norms in which we live.

*Discourse through the lenses of gender, religion, and the digital.* Research into gendered uses of the Internet by religious Jews has tended to suggest that this use opens and challenges communal norms. I would like to problematize this by suggesting we consider digital media a force that pervasively acts as a regulatory force at the hands of patriarchal powers, on the one hand and on the other hand, acts as a tool for resistance and users' involvement in the negotiation of gender and sexuality. By critically analyzing Jewish online discourse on gender and sexuality, and not only describing it, I highlight the ways in which this religious use of digital media works within a semi-dialectic tension of liberating/regulating sexual and gender norms. That is, I consider the digital as a discourse, a site of struggle, and I suggest examining this discourse through the lenses of gender/sex, religion, and the digital.

I propose a theoretical perspective that considers online texts as fossilized discourse, as sites of struggle.. Moreover, I claim this discourse can only be fully appreciated in light of the cultural (religious) and technological elements composing it. Since this approach calls to attention various elements – discursive, cultural (religious), and technological – that make up this discourse, I call this a **layered approach to digital communication**. This approach allows researchers to consider the digital as a communicative tool, a space of public negotiation, and a public sphere or site of struggle, while at the same time forcing us to consider the technical aspects of the digital and the analog cultural elements individuals and groups bring into their use of the digital as discourse. The next chapter discusses the dissertation method and sample, explains how the material was collected and why, and provides more detailed context for the

websites selected. Most importantly, in the next chapter I discuss how the method developed for this dissertation operationalizes the theoretical stance taken in this chapter.

### CHAPTER III

#### STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapter I suggested that in order to understand the online religious negotiation and construction of sexual and gender norms, we need to conceptualize digital communication as a **discourse**, and consider the technological affordances and religious worldviews that inform this discourse. This chapter will operationalize this theoretical approach by offering a method of tri-layered critical discourse analysis.

In this dissertation, I examine the ways in which power and resistance operate in digital communication. As discussed in the literature review section of this dissertation, Foucault argued that we can identify the operations of power through normative discourse (Foucault, 1988) and that we can think of discourse as a site of struggle. Digital media spaces tend to be interactive, allowing the negotiation of traditional religious power and authority, insofar as the users have a voice. However, even in these “liberated” spaces, power structures persist through discursive practices, and it is through the examination of this discourse that we can shed light on these structures (Van Zoonen, 1994; Van Doorn, Wyatt, and Van Zoonen, 2008; Dubriwny, 2012; Wallis, 2015). As discussed in the introduction and literature review, when examining Jewish discourse on gender and sexuality, we need to consider the theology as well as the *Halachic* language (Irshai, 2010). Additionally, when studying digital discourses, we need to examine the structures that maintain them – such as technological ones (Mills, 1997). Therefore, the investigation of Jewish digital discourse on gender and sexuality

demands paying attention to the discursive structures as they manifest in the text, as well as to the support mechanisms that produce or sustain the discourse in the case of this research project: the religious (or cultural) ideologies informing the users and the websites' technological affordances. This chapter will first describe the three websites which represent "mainstream" Orthodox online discourse and the sampling from these websites. It will then discuss the unique method employed in this dissertation to make sense of the discourse: a tri-layered critical discourse analysis.

### **Constructing Orthodox Digital Discourse: The Three Sites under Study**

In light of these theoretical considerations discussed in the previous chapter, I constructed a discourse focusing on gender and sexuality from three digital Orthodox websites – that is, I selected and sampled material from three Orthodox websites that will serve as representative for the discussion of gender and sexuality in these websites. The three websites selected – Chabad.org, Aish.com, and Kipa.co.il – were chosen because these are websites and communities that embraced the Internet early on and see it as a tool and a medium for religious and communal information transmission. The discourse was constructed by selecting material from the websites that deals with gender and sexuality, using the websites' categorizations ("women" or "family" sections), and/or using search words (such as "marriage," "intimacy," "woman," "husband," etc.). Namely, three websites serve as the primary text from which material was sampled: Kipa.co.il, Chabad.org and Aish.com. The three websites chosen represent mainstream

outlets for Orthodox Jews who embrace digital media and, as discussed in the introduction, are very popular with religious Jewish users (Green, 1997; Elbinger, 2012). The high volume of traffic, as well as the ability of users to participate in the content creation of the websites through commenting and sharing, make these websites venues for the representation and negotiation of contemporary Judaism. Furthermore, all three websites have a large selection of archived content, making them ideal for sampling a variety of material. More importantly, issues of gender and sexuality are discussed on all three websites, albeit in varying degrees of openness. Since this dissertation is concerned with the construction and negotiation of gender and sexuality in Jewish online discourse, I argue that focusing on popular, well-established, all-embracing websites that serve Orthodox communities is helpful when trying to portray mainstream discourse.

The popularity of these websites can be seen in several ways: First, all three websites have been active since the early 2000s; their web presences are stable and consistent. Second, they all have a high traffic volume compared to the communities they serve. For example, Chabad, the most popular of the three, has 43 million unique users per year (Chabad, 2017) out of a population of approximately 14.3 million Jews worldwide (JJPI, 2015). For the month of October 2016, Chabad had 5,500,000 unique visits; Aish had 1,350,000 unique visits; and Kipa.co.il had 640,000 unique visits (finding from Alexa.com). Finally, all of these websites' online presences have been the subject of previous scholarly study (Golan and Stadler, 2016; Blondheim and Katz, 2016; Campbell and Bellar, 2015; Campbell and Golan, 2015; Campbell and Golan, 2011; Steinitz, 2013; Steinitz, 2011). All three websites were launched early on, all are

extensive in content, meaning their designers have some experience in accommodating a communal discourse. These religious innovators saw the Internet not as a threatening medium, but rather as a tool to be used for religious information dissemination, community needs, and out-reach. Thus, these three websites represent an Orthodox approach that embraces the Internet, but uses it to promote and maintain their religious lifestyle. As such, the sites are prime examples of spaces in which religious discourse on various topics, including gender and sexuality, takes place. The next section will introduce and contextualize each website.

***Chabad.org.*** The most popular website among USA Jews is Chabad.org, which, in addition to English, operates in Hebrew, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, and Italian. Chabad.org claims it “transcends all boundaries” (Chabad, 2015a) by serving all Jews, regardless of religious affiliation (or lack thereof), language, or nation. However, the Chabad.org organization is part of a very specific Chassidic ultra-Orthodox sect known as the Lubavitch. The Lubavitch, as discussed in the introduction, is an ultra-Orthodox community centered on the worship of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who passed away in 1994, but is still considered the undisputed leader of the community, for some, a messiah figure. This history frames Chabad’s conception of media. The Chabad movement sees media as tools to spread Judaism, and specifically to promote the Rebbe’s vision of a united Jewish world (Chabad, 2017). The Chabad website is not shy about promoting the group’s religious and messianic attitudes, but tries to present this information in a way that is welcoming and all-encompassing. For example, on the “about page” Chabad begins by describing themselves as a “philosophy,



a movement, and an organization” (Chabad, 2017) and claims they are “considered to be the most dynamic force in Jewish life today” (Chabad, 2017). Later in this article, they introduce Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known simply as The Rebbe: “Motivated by his profound love for every Jew and spurred by his boundless optimism and self-sacrifice, the Rebbe set into motion a dazzling array of programs, services and institutions to serve every Jew” (Chabad, 2017). In other words, the Chabad website is produced by a global organization that seeks to missionize Jews and bring them closer to Chabad’s understanding of Judaism.

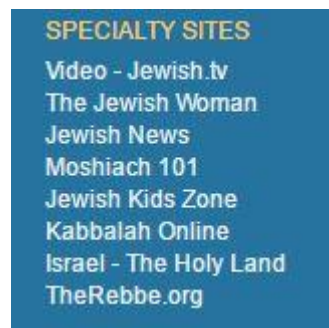
Figure 1. Kazen as presented on Chabad website.



YY Kazen at his computer in the office of the Lubavitch Yeshivah

The Chabad.org website offers a vast quantity of resources – from recipes to Kabbalah videos; content for kids, men, and women; religious study and daily activities. The website, created around 1994 in a simple ask-the-rabbi format by one Chabad follower, Yosef Yitzchak Kazen, has since grown to serve up to 43 million unique users per year (Chabad, 2015). Already in the early 1990s, Yosef Yitzchak Kazen (see Figure 1) was interested in the abilities of the Internet to spread Jewish content, and he used it to answer questions, scan and publish Jewish books, and respond on various bulletin boards (Chabad, 2017a). His initial web attempts were encouraged by the Rebbe, and Chabad is proud of their early adoption of the Internet for religious purposes.

Figure 2. List of Chabad's additional websites.



Their website is part of the Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center, and alongside the main website, they operate online audio classes, internet television (Jewish.tv), an online Jewish calendar, a *Kabbalah* website, and sites dedicated to women and children (see

Figure 2). The Chabad team includes four male rabbi leaders, who make up the Lubavitch HQ Internet Committee. Sixty-six other team members include 44 males and 20 females, as well as many contributing authors and artists, all members of the Chabad community (Chabad, 2017b). The website also includes their social media presence, with n=179,293 likes to the Facebook page; n=23,328 followers on Instagram; n=21,814 followers on Twitter; and n=2,285 followers on Pinterest (as of March 2017). While they are present on social media, it seems most of the digital interactions with Chabad happen via their website, with an average traffic of n=25,981 unique users each day (according to siteworthtraffic.com) and about 5-3.5 million visits per month (according to similarweb.com).

***Aish.com.*** Aish.com is the website created by and representing of the organization *Aish HaTorah*, founded by Rabbi Noah Weinberg in 1974 as a combination of Hasidic and Lithuanian teaching. Weinberg was an American-born Jew who moved to Israel and focuses his work and establishments on strengthening the relation between Israel and diasporic Jews. The organization is strongly pro-Israel and sees itself as a “Jewish outreach organization” (Aish, 2015). In that spirit, the website mission reads, “Aish.com’s goal is to give every Jew the opportunity to discover his or her heritage...” (Aish, 2015). According to Campbell and Bellar, “Aish.com allows Aish HaTorah the means to meet and influence secular Jews wherever they are. By using the internet within a bounded approach [...] [the website] seeks to sanctify the internet through bringing Torah and Torah-based lifestyle into the digital realm” (2015, p. 74). That is,

their outreach attitude and vision of supporting Israel frames their digital work as they view the Internet as a tool to bring Jews closer to Judaism and to Israel.

Like Chabad, the developers of Aish.com were early adopters of the Internet for religious purposes. Aish.com was founded in the year 2000, and like Chabad, is one of the most visited websites for religious Jews in the USA and around the world. According to their website, “Aish.com has become the leading Jewish content website, logging over a million monthly user sessions with 380,000 unique email subscribers” (Aish, 2015). Awarded *USA Today*’s “Hot Site” award (Aish, 2015), the website operates in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, and Hebrew, and while most of its visitors are from the USA (n=57.2%), it also has visitors from Canada, Israel, the UK, India, and Europe (according to Alexa.com). *Aish HaTorah* has an international headquarters with 30 physical branches on six continents, as well as schools and *Yeshivot* (religious higher education). They see their goal as “providing opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds to discover their heritage” (Aish, 2015). While Aish is mostly interested in reaching out to unaffiliated Jews, they are aware of the fact that, as the Internet becomes more of a necessity for everyday life, more religious Jews use the Internet. Some of these digital Orthodox users look to Aish as a source of information: “Although the site is a place to meet the unaffiliated where they are, Aish.com’s director of development does acknowledge that some of the traffic on the site comes from the Orthodox community...” (Campbell and Bellar, 2015, p. 84).

The website offers a variety of services such as news, commentary on current events, Torah lessons, family advice, recipes, Judaism 101, lessons of the Torah

portions, dating advice, and an ask-the-rabbi section. The website operates a 24-hour live webcam from the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The website content is augmented by online seminars and affiliated websites, such as an audio site, a Judaica store online, Hebrew language lessons, and a dating site (see Figure 3). The Aish.com website is managed by a team of five rabbinical ordained men, led by the editor-in-chief Rabbi Nechemia Coopersmith. Aside from the editors, Aish employs administrators responsible for the Western Wall camera, the email lists, and programming, as well as three rabbis who are in charge of the ask-the-rabbi section. Alongside the editors and staff, Aish.com has 32 featured writers, 20 of whom are male and 12 female.

Figure 3. Aish-affiliated websites.



Aish.com also has a social media presence, with the options of following Aish on Facebook (n=88,355 page likes), Twitter (n=11,051 followers), YouTube (n=28,750 subscribers), or Pinterest (n=1,577 followers) (as of March 2017). However, much like Chabad, most of the digital content and activity of Aish happens within the boundaries of the website. The website has n=10,622 unique users each day (according to

siteworthtraffic.com) and about 1.3 million visits per month (according to similarweb.com).

***Kipa.co.il.*** From the Israeli context, Kipa.co.il represents the prominent Israeli-based religious community, the National Religious community. National Religious community, as discussed in the introduction, is an Israeli Orthodox denomination. This community combines modern values (such as nationalism) with Orthodox religious tradition. Unlike Chabad and Aish, which seek to engage as many Jews as possible, Kipa is more interested in serving the National Religious community. It operates only in Hebrew and preserves its boundaries by discussing issues and using language specific to this sector. That being said, according to interviews conducted by Golan and Campbell (2015) with the website founder, Boaz Nechstern, and the CEOs, the ultimate goal of the website is to be “the leading online discussion forum about Israeli religious Judaism” (p. 479). That is, while less inclusive than Chabad and Aish, which hope to appeal to “every Jew,” Kipa’s target audience is all religiously inclined Jews in Israel. In other words, Kipa is interested in both serving the National Religious community and becoming an Israeli digital hub for religious Jews.

The founder of Kipa, Boaz Nechstern, started the website in 2000 for the specific purpose of selling *hemetz* (bread) before Passover (a religious practice that all Orthodox households must complete each year before Passover). This utilitarian approach to the digital – using it for religious rituals or needs - continues to this day on the website. That is, the website offers many religious- and sector-specific services, such as a synagogue directory, a *mikevha* (ritual bath) directory and rating system, personal and commercial

ads, *Daf Yomi* (the daily page of the Talmud), information about entertainment and events, Kosher restrictions and updates, knitting patterns, a “kosher” film index and rating, games, e-cards, geo-located *Sukkot* (for the Feast of Tabernacles holiday), and advertisements throughout the website that specifically target the religious population (ads for religious schools, for example).

Alongside the service and informational aspect of the website, the organization encourages and facilitates current discussion within the community via news updates, produced content, and user-generated content. This discussion is facilitated through forums, rabbinical Q&A, and in articles written about Jewish life, family, and holidays. Through supplying content and services, Kipa can be thought of as the most prominent online “enclave” for the National Religious movement in Israel. A range of people publish content on Kipa: journalists, rabbis, and lay men and women. Kipa also has a daily email distribution, a Facebook page (n=32,046 likes), Twitter account (with n=1,080 followers), and an Instagram account (with n=173 followers) (as of March 2017). However, much like Chabad and Aish, most of the communication and interaction within Kipa happens on the website. The website has n=3,494 unique users each day (according to siteworthtraffic.com) and an average of n=585,000 monthly visits (according to similarweb.com).

***Summary of sites studied.*** These three websites serve as the primary sources for what I suggest is the online normative discourse for contemporary Orthodox Judaism in Israel and the USA. That is, all three websites wish to define and represent Judaism while also being a resource and communal space for their community. As a result, they

*de facto* embody “normative” Orthodox Judaism online – the opinions and attitudes that Orthodox Jews who use the Internet seek and might agree with. As discussed above, all three websites are popular with Orthodox Jews (Green, 1997; Elbinger, 2012), thus we can conclude they are “sought.” The interactive aspects of the websites – sharing and commenting - also reveal the levels of agreement within the user community. Because these websites represent mainstream Orthodox Judaism online, I suggest we can use their texts related to gender and sexuality (content created by the website writers, comments and interactions, questions and answers) and decipher them as a discourse in which Jewish gender and sexual norms are negotiated.

As can be seen from the above context, while all three websites represent Orthodox Judaism that embraces digital media, they also represent different sectors within Orthodoxy. These communities/organizations – Chabad, Aish *HaTorah*, and the National Religious – differ in size, location, and attitudes. Most notably, Chabad and Aish have a missionary vocation, while Kipa does not. This was kept in mind when conducting the analysis of the material. However, all three communities have a few important things in common, most notably for the investigation of this dissertation, their acceptance of digital media and their negotiation of modernity and tradition. It is this negotiation of modernity that forces these communities to address feminism and liberal attitudes towards sex, and to reframe and clarify their traditional internal gender/sex norm in terms of the modern, secular, and (neo)liberal world, as will be seen throughout this dissertation. That being said, the analysis considers how issues of national culture (USA, Israel), inclusion purposes, and theological differences (messianic, nationalistic,



etc.) inform the discussion on the different websites. At the same time, it is the similarities in the discourse that point to the overarching attitudes in the Orthodox world towards the negotiation of gender/sex norm, which is the interest of this dissertation. Therefore, certain texts from each website were chosen that represent and discuss issues of gender and sexuality. The sampling logic, time frames, data collection, storage, and coding are discussed in the next section.

### **Data Sample and Sampling**

The texts selected were sampled from material existing in these websites such as: Q&A (questions sent to rabbis and their answers), Torah lectures (sermons or lessons teaching a portion of the Hebrew Bible, usually accompanied with other religious or spiritual sources, and/or current events), advice columns (where men and women who are not necessarily rabbis supply advice regarding dating, family life, etc.), videos (dealing with various topics), and general articles (usually presenting either religious news, covering current events, or supplying opinions from a variety of writers), all of which deal with the topics of either sexuality or gender-relations. For selecting the Q&A, I used the categorization and tag words already provided by the websites, focusing on tags and categories related to sexuality and gender, such as “intimacy,” “modesty,” “family life,” “marriage,” etc. For the selection of articles and other material, when a tagging/categorizing system is not provided by the websites, I selected material that

clearly falls under the themes of gender relation and sexuality and deals with contemporary life of the community and its members as related to the themes.

This sample was collected during two time-frames: 1. Q&A material was collected between March and May 2016; 2. Other material was collected between August and October 2016. While the author of this dissertation has been observing both Kipa.co.il and Chabad.org since 2013, official data collection began in 2016. The two time frames were chosen to streamline the process of the dissertation, first collecting material for the first analysis chapter, which analyzes Q&A and *Halachic* language, and later collecting material for the second analysis chapter, which focuses on meaning-making narratives. As will be discussed later, the first chapter deals with practice as negotiated through ask-the-rabbi website sections, and the second chapter deals with meaning as negotiated through personal/editorial columns, articles, and videos.

The material sampled for the first analysis chapter (Chapter IV) includes n=60 Q&A from Aish.com, Kipa.co.il, and Askmoses.org (Chabad) regarding masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa* (abstinence). The sample was finalized in May 2016, and consists of Q&A from different answering rabbis, different dates, and Q&A with and without comments. The variety of the material is purposeful – the analysis will portray a broad picture of the general attitudes and approaches to gender and sex, how those are constructed and presented, and in what ways are these norms negotiated. Thus, while attention will be paid to context and specific rabbi's style, the overall purpose is to highlight the ways in which gender and sex are constructed and negotiated in this discourse.

The sample for Chapter IV includes n=60 Q&A: n=28 from Kipa.co.il (in Hebrew, translated by the author); n=22 from Askmoses, a Chabad daughter website dedicated to Q&A (Davids, 2009); and 10 from Aish.org. Thirty-nine questions concern *Shmirat Negiaa* (n=18 from Kipa, n=13 from Askmoses, n=8 from Aish) and 21 concern masturbation (n=10 from Kipa, n=9 from Askmoses, n=2 from Aish). Out of the n=21 masturbation Q&A, n=6 deal with female masturbation and n=15 with male masturbation. The questions on the Askmoses and Aish websites are not time stamped, so a time frame cannot be offered. Questions on Kipa.co.il were posted between 2004 and 2014. All questions were collected by May 2016 and saved offline to the author's files. The Kipa and Askmoses websites allow for reaction and comments, and thus, when users made comments, those were also saved and will be considered as part of the Q&A (total of n=81 comments: n=49 in Kipa and n=32 in Askmoses).

The material for the second analysis chapter (Chapter V) was collected from the general material related to gender and sexuality (not only the Q&A sections) from the websites of Chabad, Aish, and Kipa. I searched for texts by looking into the sections of the websites dedicated to "women" or "family." All three websites have special sections dedicated to these issues. To illustrate: Aish has two important sections for the sample of this dissertation – Family and Dating. Under the tab Family, users can find subsections such as Marriage, Parenting, Mom with a View, Heart of the Matter, etc. Under the tab Dating three subsections are accessible: Dating Advice, Dating Wisdom, and Jessica's Journal (similar to a Jewish version of *Bridget Jones Diaries*). Chabad divides their website to four sections: Jewish Practice, Learning and Values, Community and Family,

and Inspiration and Entertainment. Under the Community and Family section, users can find various subsections related to family life, such as, Parenting, Relationship, and the specialty site The Jewish Woman. Kipa also has two important sections for this dissertation: Family and Women. Under Family users can find various articles, and some subsections such as Education, Marriage and Dating, and Nutrition. Under Women there are various articles and a few subsections such as Marriage and Dating and Pregnancy.

I used the websites' search functions to look up tags or key words such as "gender," "sex," "marriage," "intimacy," etc. The sample was conducted by combining both "pulling" of articles by using these tag words, and finding articles that were "pushed" in the specialty sections mentioned above. This resulted in a total of  $n=48$  texts:  $n=16$  from Aish,  $n=15$  from Chabad, and  $n=17$  from Kipa. While the sampling took place between September and November of 2016, the articles and comments were published from as early as 2000 (Aish, 2016a) to as late as October 2016 (Kipa, 2016b). This text includes  $n=48$  online articles, out of which nine are videos (five videos from Kipa and four from Aish), and a total of  $n=1103$  comments. Each article or video was saved in a digital format to my personal computer and later uploaded to Dedoose (<http://www.dedoose.com>), the online coding software I used to code the material. Coding was produced by close reading of the material and noting repeated issues or explicit words. For example, while reading the material it became clear that feminism was an important issue; the article titles alone mention feminism four times. As a result, anytime the word feminism occurred that sentence or excerpt was labeled "feminism."

For both chapters' samples the material was stored on my personal computer, as well as on the cloud. All material was copied and saved to Microsoft Word documents. Excel spreadsheets were created with information about each source: the gender of the author, number of comments, number of shares, etc. That material (Q&A pages and their comments, articles webpages and their comments, transcripts from videos) was then carefully read and coded in order to conduct the analysis. Coding was produced by the author using programs such as Voyant and Dedoose, which offer visual representations of codes and repeated words. Voyant was useful in illuminating important words which were repeated. Dedoose was useful in charting the different codes, retrieving texts, and representing the relationships between different codes and texts – e.g., charting in which texts code X was present and how many times, or how many codes and which codes a certain text had. Aside from textual features that can be highlighted by content analysis, other measurements were conducted, such as coding the Q&A material as supportive, negotiating, or opposing the religious authority/position. Lastly, the textual material and its features were analyzed using a tri-layered critical discourse analysis. The next section details the analysis process using the tri-layered critical discourse analysis.

### **Methodology: A Tri-Layered Critical Discourse Analysis**

Since the theoretical approach of this dissertation understands the material collected as a discourse in a Foucauldian sense, it makes sense to employ the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Meyer, 2001). CDA is understood in this dissertation

as the “empirical study of the relation between discourse and social and cultural developments” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 60). As a method, it includes analyzing the forms of social practice and power enacted in a text by examining the words, phrases, and structures used in the discourse (Fairclough, 1989; Barker and Galasinski, 2001). However, this investigation is not an investigation of the specific grammatical choices, but rather of the worldviews that are constructed through the texts. As argued by Graham, “discourse analysis using Foucault focuses less on the micro [...] and more on the macro (Threadgold, 2003), that is, what is “made up” by the text itself” (2011, p. 670). It is important to note that the type of criticism I executed is interested in illuminating the ideological purposes of that discourse – that is, how religious concepts and power structures are negotiated in the discourse. Critical discourse analysis helps us look at how this discourse either justifies, normalizes, contextualizes, or problematizes the Orthodox communal norms of sexuality and gender.

In what follows, I expand CDA to operationalize my theoretical stance. While CDA does consider **discourse**, it does not take into account the digital or Orthodox aspects of this specific discourse. Thus, in order to methodologically examine Orthodox digital discourse, I propose a tri-layered analysis: 1) examining technological affordances, 2) examining religious worldviews, and 3) examining discursive strategies. I suggest that this type of analysis sheds light on the perspectives on gender and sexuality as they emerge in online mainstream Orthodox Jewish discourse.

*Operationalizing a layered approach.* CDA as suggested by Fairclough works in three stages: description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough, 1989). The first

stage is concerned with “the formal properties of the text” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 25) – that is, the creation, production, and sampling of the text that is analyzed. This is an important stage and Fairclough stressed that researchers must be aware of their bias and interpretive work even at the stage of sampling. This first stage was addressed in the sample section, and considers which websites were chosen and which texts were collected from the websites. The second stage, interpretation, is the level of the main linguistic and hermeneutical work of analyzing and making-sense of the material. At this stage I suggest a unique model that allows for a holistic interpretation of the material. This will be further expanded upon in this section. The third stage of CDA suggested by Fairclough is the stage of explanation. At this stage some initial theories and explanations of the analysis created in the second stage are provided, an explanation that keeps in mind the context as well as the text itself. This stage will be addressed in the analysis chapters and in the conclusion chapter.

The focus of this section is the method of interpretation applied in this dissertation. At the stage of interpretation, CDA as a method includes dissecting the grammatical choices, categorizing the relations and interactions presented in the discourse, and explicitly reading meaning into the practices located in the discourse. It is at this level, interpretation, that I suggest attention to the use of technological affordances and religious ideologies.

I developed an interpretive model (see Figure 4) that takes into account three main properties of a digital religious discourse: the digital (technological affordances/media logics), the religious (cultural context), and the discourse (linguistic/discursive

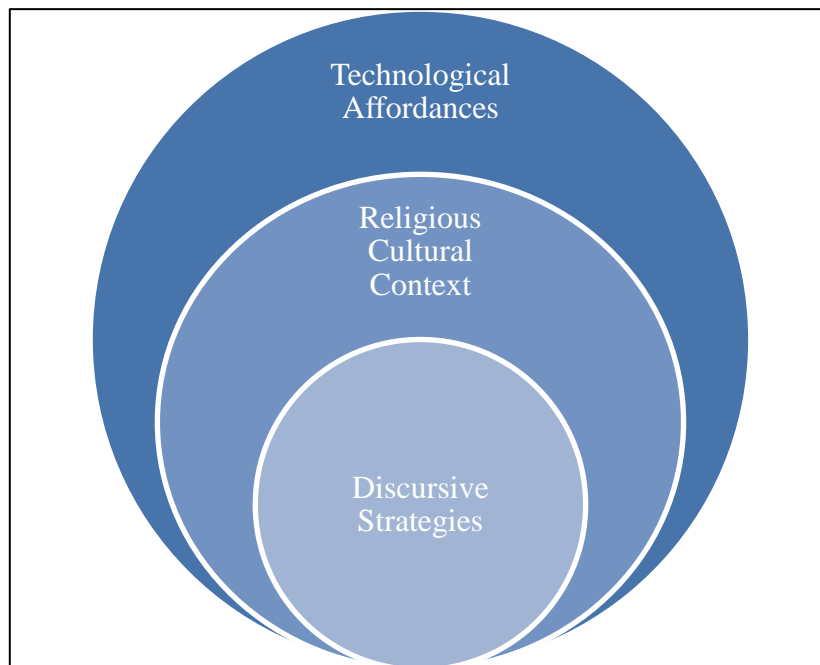
strategies). This approach is inspired by André Brock's Critical Technological Discourse Analysis (Brock, 2009; Brock, 2012; Sweeney and Brock, 2014). Brock argued that paying attention to the technological affordances and how they are used is important for understanding "how the internet's form and function visually, symbolically and interactively mediate discourse" (Brock, 2009, p. 345). In both his 2009 and 2012 work, Brock offered a technological analysis section, in which he described and analyzed the specific technological interface (Twitter in the 2012 article, blogs and other online material in the 2009 piece) alongside cultural analysis, in which he offered an examination of the social and cultural texts and contexts. Similar to Brock's CTDA, my analysis examines the cultural elements – the use of specific religious language, as well as the explicit and implicit textual negotiation strategies, and the technological elements – how the affordances of the websites are used and to what end. However, Brock did not operationalize his method or offer a concrete version, neither did he offer a clear distinction between the cultural (or in this case, religious) and the discursive elements. What my model contributes is the ability to take apart each aspect and then put them together, as well as a need to clearly articulate what possible offline cultural aspects might brought into the digital discourse.

The tri-layered analysis model operationalizes the theoretical approach at the stage of interpretation. To make systematic sense of the material, I arrange each analysis chapter in three layers of analysis: technological (which can be thought of as the macro, the study of the "space" in which the discourse takes place), linguistic (the meso-level, in which semiotics and pragmatic uses of language help construct and negotiate social



practices), and the religious (the micro-level, the focused ideology that informs the construction and negotiation). These layers, I hold, are fluid as they also inform one another: the religious world-view informs one's use of technology (Campbell, 2010; Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005). My analysis is thus a layered one, which considers the technological affordances, the religious cultural context, and the discursive strategies (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Tri-layer CDA Model.



This model suggests three analysis layers that inform one another. The first layer is the technological, the space and tools allowed by the Internet and how these are used by

discourse participants. Media logics (Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2009; Altheide, 2013) can help us explain the social context in terms of **production** of the discourse. That is, the discourse created in these online Jewish websites is produced within the logic and affordances of the Internet. The distinctive features of the medium – the hyperlinks, interactive options, visual choices, etc. – help shape, reshape, organize, and dictate the rhythm, style, and possibilities of expressions for the users. As Altheide argued, “social order is a communicated order, and the rules and logics of the underlying formats of communication have reshaped many activities...” (2013, p. 225).

The second layer of the model is concerned with the religious/cultural-specific, i.e. the worldviews brought into the discourse from outside the Internet. The religious cultural context, it is argued, informs the ways in which users partake in the discourse, the cultural lenses that paint the negotiation and construction. These lenses can be thought of as the focused ideologies that inform the approach to the digital itself (Campbell, 2010), the construction and negotiation, and the power and resistance that take place in this discourse. Lastly, the discursive strategies themselves are analyzed. This can be a linguistic, rhetorical, or critical analysis, in which the researcher explores the semiotics and pragmatic uses of language that construct and negotiate the social practices. The following table indicates the type of questions and interpretive categories each layer provokes, as well as the data explored at each layer of the analysis as they relate to gender and sexuality:

**Table 1: Tri-Layered Analysis**

| <b>Analysis Layer</b>             | <b>Questions Asked</b>   | <b>Data Examined</b>   |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Technological</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What does the medium allow?</li></ul>  | Website design, sharing  |
| <b>Affordances</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do the users utilize the affordances?</li><li>• How do the technological affordances support/construct the discourse?</li></ul>  | capabilities, interactive capabilities, other technological abilities of the website   |
| <b>Religious cultural context</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are the religious cultural context that are used?</li><li>• Does the text use religious terms, secular terms, or both?</li><li>• How are theological/religious terms constructed?</li><li>• What is defined as the (theological) ideal gender/sex behavior?</li></ul> | Religious cultural artifacts, Hebrew/Yiddish words, religious vocabularies Biblical citations, names of rabbis or religious leaders, other religious expressions |

**Table 1: Tri-Layered Analysis Continued**

| <b>Analysis Layer</b>                            | <b>Questions Asked</b>  | <b>Data Examined</b>  |
|--|---|---|
| <b>Linguistic/<br/>Discursive<br/>Strategies</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What power struggles take place in the text? Who is privileged?</li><li>• How is knowledge created? Who gets to voice their opinion? Who is silenced?</li><li>• What subject position is constructed through this text?</li><li>• Which words or terms are repeated and have a strong symbolic resonance?</li><li>• What are the linguistic tactics for normalizing/constructing certain behaviors?</li></ul> | Pragmatic features of the text, conventions, norms, codes of practice, etc. |

These three layers help illuminate the ways in which perspectives about gender and sex are formed in this online discourse. Examining the technological affordances and their use informs the relationship between the medium and the discourse. It reveals the choices made – both by website designers and by users – about the structure of the discourse and what kind of interaction is invited and embraced. Examining the religious cultural context emphasizes the ways in which the religious ideology influences the

discourse. It stresses what religious terms are portrayed, and how they are used in the construction of norms. And lastly, examining the discursive strategies highlights the linguistic tactics and techniques present. It explores who talks, how knowledge is created, what is valued, and what approaches are used in the negotiation of gender and sexual norms.

Such a methodological approach is structured by several considerations. As suggested by Bonnie Dow, critical-rhetorical research steps away from pure scientific language and instead suggests an engagement with the text that is not based on discovery but on creation. Dow suggested that “if science searches for truth, criticism in the artistic mode seeks to move us, to interest us, to create works that makes us think about the world in new ways” (2001, p. 345). The method used in this dissertation could be thought of as drawing out what is inherent in our position as critics – it is the method of problematizing, of critiquing, of asking “why?”, “so?”, and “what if?”. This method has been put to good use by scholars such as Dubriwny who notes, “...as a critic... I do not lay claim to truth. Rather, I understand my work to be a species of argument, and thus, like the very texts I analyze, my criticism is fundamentally rhetorical” (2012, p. 8). This dissertation takes a critical stance, showing the digital as a discourse, which, while having the potential for resistance in the form of interactive and participatory affordances, acts to uphold traditional (patriarchal) power structures. That is, the analysis produced in this dissertation highlights the discursive strategies employed for either maintaining traditional power or for resisting it. A grounded approach to the material suggests two underlying and overarching sets of discourses: Discourse of Practice

(Chapter IV of this dissertation) and Discourse of Meaning (Chapter V of this dissertation). These are further explained in the following section.

### **Discourse of Practice, Discourse of Meaning: Making Sense of the Material from a Religious-Cultural Perspective**

As previously mentioned, the websites discussed above each have a variety of content, but this dissertation only examines content related to the topics of sexuality and gender. Therefore, based on my initial engagement with the material, I suggest two types of discourse can be noted: discourse related to practice and discourse related to meaning. I devote an analysis chapter to each discourse. Discourse related to practice (Chapter IV) examines the ways in which religious practices related to gender and sexuality are discussed and negotiated. Although practice can be defined in various ways, in the case of Judaism, a praxis-based religion, I focus on the legal, religious practice – the *Halacha*. Therefore, Chapter IV examines the ways in which *Halachic* legal discussion takes place online and how it safeguards religious Jewish sexual and gender norms through the use of online Q&A. As will be explained in detail in Chapter IV, *Halacha* is the legal codex by which Orthodox religious Jews conduct their lives. It details rules about moral behavior, holidays, food and agriculture, cleanliness, relationships, finance, and almost every aspect of daily life. The *Halacha* is an ongoing process, and it develops in relation to developments in social and technological surroundings. As part of these developments, there is a growing discussion of *Halacha*, especially in the form of Q&A

between rabbis and lay people. Q&A in Jewish tradition has had a long history of reshaping legal thinking, a practice known as *Responsa*. *Responsa* online offers a unique re-negotiation of the legal understandings of sexuality and gender, since this new medium allows for anonymity and immediate feedback. Therefore, this first analysis chapter will examine how these online Q&A might be reforming *Halachic* discourse on gender and sexuality. This chapter surveys Q&A from the three selected websites (Kipa, Chabad, and Aish) and examines how practices related to gender and sexuality are constructed and negotiated through this discourse.

A second type of discourse analyzed in Chapter V is concerned with meaning making rather than practice. The Discourse of Meaning focuses on how gender and sexuality are discussed in forums, articles, advice columns, etc. In these texts, users bring up issues from their personal experiences as well as communal expectations, and try to make sense of them. Here, gender identities and sexual behaviors are brought up to be discussed in terms of their personal and communal significance, in a process of value and sense making. The analysis considers gender norms. How are women and men understood and discussed? What constitutes an ideal household? In other words, the discourse constructs ideal gender and sexual relations as well as daily, lived struggles. These illuminate the perspectives on correct gender and sex as represented and negotiated in this online environment.

The discourses emerging from the data address the principles of the Jewish Home. The Jewish Home, a concept pivotal to Jewish peoplehood, relies on a few core principles: people should get married, marriage is between males and females, sexuality

is a positive force with the limits of *Halacha*, men are dominant in the household – their dominance based on their access to Torah and *Halachic* knowledge – and women should be good mothers and modest wives. The material helps illuminate the construction and maintenance of these concepts and behaviors by examining the digital discourse in which these principles are discussed, practiced, enforced, or challenged.

The distinction between the discourses of meaning and the discourses of practice, is somewhat artificial. These discourses are inherently tied together because of the underlying interrelationship of meaning and practice. Practice in both quotidian and extraordinary contexts is a meaning-laden and meaning-creating activity, and meaning in the forms of definitional and organizational systems has enormous implications for practice. This syzygy is separated in the analysis only to illuminate the complexity of the topic while staying focused on the subject matter. Both discourses are, on the one hand, part of the construction of gender and sexuality in Judaism as it appears in the selected websites. On the other hand, each discourse also deals with a different aspect of sexuality and gender. The first analysis chapter presents the *Halachic*, legal developments and negotiations online. The second analysis chapter takes a closer look at how users deal with gender and sexual norms, and how these norms and behaviors are negotiated in the mainstream discourse. Together, they act as descriptive examples of the existing perspectives on gender and sex in Orthodox online discourse, as well as the ways digital media is being used by religious individuals to expand and/or regulate concepts of sexuality and gender.



## Summary

In summary, I created a tri-layered analysis model based on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to decipher how gender and sexuality are constructed in online Jewish Orthodox discourse. This method includes three layers of analysis: technological, religious, and discursive that when put together, highlight the complexity of online discourse and how it serves as a site of struggle, in which negotiation and coercion are practiced. That is, the analysis chapters that follow highlight the perspectives represented in the Orthodox Jewish online discourse and show how this discourse normalizes and problematizes traditional religious gender norms and sexual behaviors. I examine three mainstream Orthodox websites as my source material: Chabad.org, Aish.com, and Kipa.co.il. The sample was collected in three timeframes: October to December 2013, October to December 2014, and January to March 2016. Material collected includes Q&A, Torah sermons, articles, videos, and personal/advice columns. All the material collected falls clearly under the themes of sexuality and gender and was copied and saved in offline documents. As a result of my initial analysis of the sample, two thematic types of discourses emerged: 1) Discourse of Practice: online *Halachic* discussion related to gender and sexuality and 2) Discourse of Meaning: online discussion of personal and communal value and significance related to sexuality and gender norms and behaviors. Each discourse is analyzed in a separate chapter of the dissertation. The analysis itself is conducted in three layers: 1) technological affordances and their adoption, 2) religious cultural context and their implementation, and 3) linguistic choices

and their meaning. The empirical examples from the websites help illustrate the negotiation and construction of gender and sexual norms and highlight the negotiation strategies.

The Tri-layered model I suggest is helpful for studying the negotiation of gender online because it forces the researcher to consider three important elements of religious digital discourse: the digital, the religious, and the discourse. Trying to decipher a discourse is a complicated task, because unlike other power structures in society (prisons, schools, churches), discourses do not have explicit or tangible characteristics. As a result, analyzing them – breaking down the different elements that constitute them – is very difficult. What this model offers is a way to separate at least some of the elements that constitute this discourse. This is necessary when studying any discourse, I believe, but it is especially necessary when studying the construction and negotiation of gender/sex, which, many times, seems natural or pervasive (Fraser, 1989; Lazar, 2000). In other words, this model tries to make more explicit what is to some degree implicit – the ways the digital enables certain kinds of conversations; the ways cultural and religious worldviews inform our daily behaviors; and the discursive strategies people employ to construct, maintain, negotiate or resist social norms. Furthermore, this model can contribute to and be applicable in research of discourse in other digital contexts.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DISCOURSE OF PRACTICE – ANALYZING ONLINE JEWISH Q&A ON GENDER AND SEXUAL BEHAVIORS

This first analysis chapter focuses on the Discourse of Practice – that is, the negotiation and construction of gender and sexual norms (“discourse”) via an online discussion of the religiously legal (*Halachic*) behaviors (“practice”). As noted above, practice and meaning are ultimately tied together; as acting and preforming are methods by which people enact meaning (Butler, 1990). This chapter focuses on one half of the meaning-practice dialectic within Judaism, specifically focusing on the Halachic rules and regulations regarding gender and sexuality. The main objects of consideration in this chapter are 60 questions and answers (hereafter: Q&A) sent to rabbis on all three websites (Chabad.org, Aish.com, Kipa.co.il), as well as the comments and online reactions to these Q&A. Online, users can anonymously submit personal and religious questions to multiple rabbis on these sites – and indeed, many religious users utilize this as an opportunity to ask questions they might not be willing to raise in similar offline contexts. This digital format of Q&A allows taboo questions to be raised and gives individuals easier direct access to rabbis, especially people who in the past had limited interactions with rabbis – like women (Pitkowsky, 2011). However, as this chapter makes clear, this dissertation is **not** highlighting the ways online Q&A is changing *Halacha*. In fact, this chapter shows how the digital discourse is used to maintain traditional views and norms concerning gender and sex. By conceptualizing the digital as

a discourse in a Foucauldian sense, this chapter emphasizes the ways in which both power and resistance operate in contemporary digital Jewish Orthodox discourse practices, through online Q&A.

Before discussing online Q&A practices it is important to consider the relationship between discourse and practice. The examination of (religious/legal/*Halachic*) practices makes sense for this dissertation's investigation, since the ways people enact their gender are largely through behaviors and practices (Butler, 1990); the ways people dress, speak, react to the other sex, and interact in general tend to be determined by/indicate to others what their gender is. Furthermore, discourse and practice are combined in communication theory in different ways: through speech-act (Pratt, 1977) in which the discourse, the spoken word, creates actions in the real world. In the case of Judaism, a praxis-based religion, the relationship between discourse and practice is vital, since much of the religious discourse tends to be a legal discourse, thus dictating the daily actions of religious individuals. At the same time, lived experiences trickle back and prescribe the *Halachic* discussion (Reisman, 1995). A current example of this is the case of homosexuality, which, although still clearly forbidden in Orthodox legal discourse, is starting to be practiced even by those who define themselves as Orthodox. As a result, Orthodox *Halachic* discussion now deals with questions such as, "Can a gay man be part of a synagogue?" and "What is the [legal] place of LGBT individuals in the Jewish community?" (Tapuz, 2016) In this way, the lived reality is reflected and negotiated in the *Halachic* discourse.

This relation between practice and discourse is expanded with the use of digital technologies in the form of digital Q&A. As will be shown throughout this chapter, Orthodox communities that adopt digital media often use them for various religious purposes, such as asking the rabbi. Through text messages, phone calls, specialized websites, or website sections, religious users have almost immediate access to rabbis. Consulting with a rabbi is an established custom in Jewish tradition. This is captured in the saying “Make for yourself a rabbi” (Pirkei Avot, 1:6), which means every person should actively seek a rabbi to confer with. Furthermore, questions sent to rabbis throughout Jewish history have created the *Halachic* literature known as *Responsa*. However, with the spread of digital technology, the scale and style of *Responsa* is shifting (Steinitz, 2011). While in the past *Responsa* was a more elite activity, as it required literacy and money, digital response is accessible to most people. Furthermore, via online interactions, questions related to sexual and gender norms are also becoming more frequent and more explicit, as both women and sexual minorities are actively taking part in the *Responsa* discourse (Pitkowsky, 2011). This negotiation of gender and sexual norms takes place both in the general online discourse, and specifically in the *Responsa* discourse, where it has the potential to directly impact accepted practice. For example, if a woman writes an article describing her difficulties with the practice of abstaining from premarital touch with her boyfriend (no hugging), and users react to this article, comforting her or confronting her, I suggest that this is a negotiation at the level of meaning, norms, and discourse. However, if she writes to a rabbi, asking permission to hug her boyfriend, and the rabbi approves, this would be a more explicit negotiation

of *Halachic* practice. Therefore, this first analysis chapter examines a discourse related to practices, as addressed through online Q&A, to see how digital technologies influence this discourse, and how sexual and gender laws in contemporary Judaism are constructed and negotiated through online Q&A.

The first section of the chapter reviews the previous approaches to Q&A as a medium, followed by a discussion of current Jewish approaches to digital Q&A. After providing this context and discussion of two specific Jewish sexual laws (masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa*), I conduct an analysis of online Q&A related to these specific laws. As outlined in the methods chapter, I employ a tri-layered critical discourse analysis that includes examining the technological affordances, the religious cultural context, and the discursive strategies. The analysis of the Q&A and the reactions to the Q&A (through sharing and commenting) highlight the negotiation and the ways in which gender and sexual norms are constructed in this digital discourse.

### **Contextualizing Q&A (*Responsa*) as a Form of Discourse**

*Responsa* is a rabbinical expression for the exchange of letters (or other forms of communication technology) in which one party consults another on a *Halachic* or sometimes theological matter. Letters and scrolls found in ancient synagogues or that have survived in handwriting were later published in print editions. One reason for the publication of these letters is that these texts reveal the ways in which, *Halachic* discourse developed: the discussions between rabbis and communities and the ways

lived experiences informed legal and theological traditions (Epstein, 1930). In other words, the practice of asking the rabbi is a religiously and historically rooted form of negotiating norms. As Steinitz (2011) points out “a rabbi answering a question must take into consideration what Menachem Elon refers to as a ‘living legal reality,’ a set of social and economic factors that influence the *Halachic* discourse” (p. 86). In other words, *Responsa* can be thought of as a site of *Halachic* molding, a site of push and pull between the lived needs and the traditional decrees, a Foucauldian discourse (Irshai, 2010).

***Understanding Q&A (Responsa) as a digital discourse.*** With advances in communication technologies, the practice of Q&A also adopted and incorporated new forms of media into this tradition. *Responsa* was mailed, printed, telegraphed, faxed, broadcasted on the radio, and finally emailed, texted, and posted online (Rashi, 2012). Digital media tools were used to spread *Halachic* debate throughout Jewish history, be it print, radio, newspapers, and pamphlets, or fax (Blondheim, 2015; Rashi, 2012). So Q&A became more immediate and access to rabbis around the globe increased. It is therefore not surprising that *Responsa* found its way to the digital in the form of online Q&A or “ask-the-rabbi” websites. Online, we tend to think of our interactions as happening in the moment, of the Internet as a “use-and-forget” source of knowledge. However, for Jews using online Q&A, if they think of them as a new medium for an old practice, Q&A is not something we can forget. It is the opposite – the answer a rabbi gives online becomes part of the vast, ancient, and ongoing *Halachic* corpus. It is in this religious context that religious digital Q&A take place. Digital *Responsa*, or ask the

rabbi-type services date back to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Internet became a public medium (as examined by the author of this dissertation using web archives). For example, Chabad and Aish both started their ask-the-rabbi sections in 1999; the AskMoses.com beta site offered Q&A from the year 2000; and Kipa started their sections from 2001. Aside from online Q&A, rabbis are also accessible for Q&A via mobile phone services (text-based Q&A). Text-based Q&A usually remains private, because it is a type of personal communication, and thus does not become part of the overall, explicit, public religious discourse. Since these text-based Q&A are not publicly accessible, they cannot be considered a communal component of digital religious discourse for the purposes of this dissertation.

Academic research on digital *Responsa* has examined the ways in which the digital medium has shaped the practice (Gottesman, 2009; Herskovitz, 2008; Nachtstern, 2008; Pitkowsky, 2011; Steinitz, 2011). A survey of previous studies reveals that the main topics of interest have included: how the medium challenges rabbinical authority (Herskovitz, 2008; Nachtstern, 2008; Steinitz, 2011; Pitkowsky, 2011); changes in *Halachic* language (Gottesman, 2009; Nachtstern, 2008; Steinitz, 2011); and how the anonymity of the Internet allows taboo questions to be asked (Gottesman, 2009; Pitkowsky, 2011). That is, most scholarship examining Jewish online Q&A has understood them as *Responsa*, as suggested in this dissertation. While this dissertation is unique within these studies since it conceptualizes online Q&A as part of a Foucauldian discourse, this current research also reaffirms some of the assertions made in previous research. Specifically, the analysis of the technological affordances and religious cultural



context offered later in this chapter supports two claims made in these studies: 1) that the medium allows for a participatory discussion, and 2) that the *Halachic* and religious language in online *Responsa* is different than in traditional *Responsa*. However, as will be seen from the analysis, Q&A and the users' reactions to them tend by and large in this dissertation to function as a form of support to rabbinical authority, and not, as the above-mentioned scholars suggested, as a challenge.

That the medium allows for a more participatory discussion is argued in this scholarship by highlighting the technological elements of the medium and how they shape this discourse. For example, Nachtstern (2008) and Gottesman (2009) both pointed to certain logics held by online media, which then influence the religious use of these media. According to Gottesman, for example, the structure of online Q&A tends to equalize rabbi and asker and thus breaks down hierarchy. This means users can directly and instantly disagree, ask for further information, or suggest their own opinion on the rabbi's judgment. The result, according to Gottesman (2009), is a more democratic *Responsa*. While this dissertation will also showcase how the technological affordances create a participatory discourse, it also shows that hierarchies and power are still present in this online discourse.

The existing literature also tends to emphasize the "entrance" of a new medium to a traditional society, and the resulting changes in religious *Halachic* language. For example, Steinitz describe the weakening of the *Halachic* terminology in online *Responsa* thus:

The influence of this new genre on the *halachic* world is enormous from the perspectives of both the scholars and their followers. While online

Q&A websites are very different from traditional *Responsa*, they present scholars and laymen with an opportunity for lively, egalitarian discourse, which can challenge pre-existing halachic conceptions. Unfortunately, the cases reviewed in this article demonstrate that so far, this new medium has failed to produce serious, challenging discussion, and instead promotes superficial answers from the scholars' side, and foul language from the surfers' side. (Steinitz, 2011, p. 98)

That is, Steinitz and other scholars examining Jewish online Q&A saw it as a new genre taking part in an old *Halachic* discourse. The new medium with its new affordances also influences the way the religious terminology is used and understood – rabbis' answers are, according to Steinitz, "superficial." Indeed, as will be seen from the analysis of the religious cultural context in this chapter, few *Halachic* sources are used, and generally religious terms are employed in a monosemic, simplistic way.

Understanding online *Responsa* as a digital discourse suggests that digital media implications (i.e., the technological affordances) make this discourse more participatory. The meaning of these participatory possibilities is, however, up for interpretation. Some scholars have seen it as a challenge to rabbinical authority, a *Halachic* and religious language, and as a boarding of the communal discourse to discuss taboo issues. The next subsection discuss more in depth how previous research investigated Jewish online Q&A which deal with issues of gender and sexuality.

***Situating Q&A (Responsa) as a digital discourse in relation to gender and sexuality.*** The possibilities and challenges digital media introduce to *Responsa* literature are most apparent when issues of gender and sexuality are concerned. Generally, traditional *Responsa* does not pay much attention to women's issues and needs. It is only in recent years that *Responsa* literature has dealt more clearly with issues of gender and

sexuality (see, for example rabbi David Golinkin's work, *The Status of Women in Jewish Law: Responsa*, or rabbi Samuel Kedar's *Heical Shalomo* on family purity). But even when the sensitive topics of gender and sexuality have been discussed in traditional *Responsa*, the discussion arose from a male perspective (*de facto*, since women did not take part in writing or answering *Halachic* questions). That is, in the past and in offline *Responsa*, women had minimal access to *Halachic* texts or to rabbis, and any questions or concerns they might have had would usually have been represented through male authority (husband or father). As Zohar points in his review of Golinkin's work:

Perhaps Rabbi Golinkin has fallen into a certain trap, whereby the importance of issues is defined not by their centrality in people's lives but by their centrality in intellectual discourse. Are all of the topics dealt with in this book central to the experience of real-life women? How much of a woman's life is occupied with synagogue ritual? What of career, marriage, family? (2004, p. 241)

In other words, even modern attempts to include women's issues in *Responsa* literature seem to be missing the female voice or do not deal critically and openly with issues of sexuality (Halpern and Safrai, 1998). Thus, digital *Responsa* presents new and exciting possibilities for Jewish religious women (Pitkowsky, 2011), as well as for the exploration of sexual norms (Tsuria, 2016). In her work, Pitkowsky reviewed questions sent to rabbis in the last century and compared offline questions to online ones.

Pitkowsky analyzed 72 women's online Q&A uploaded to the website Kipa.co.il during 2010. She celebrated the power online Q&A provides these women, as far as access to knowledge and a voice in legal religious debates: "I argue that the Internet has in a sense changed the rules of the game by allowing women almost unbridled access to rabbinic

authority” (p. 134). Similarly, the work done by Michal Raucher highlighted the avenues opened by the Internet for the involvement of women in *Halachic* discourse. Her research focused on *Yoatzot Halacha* (*Halacha* advisers), women who answer questions online regarding the female body (specifically topics of menstruation and family purity). She showed how the Internet has allowed for “(a) the expanded roles of women as legal authorities, and (b) women’s exploration of topics otherwise not discussed...” (2015, p. 69).

Historically and offline, issues of gender and sexuality have been dealt with from a patriarchal approach, with little to no resistance or negotiation (Halpern and Safrai, 1998). For example, in the middle ages, women resisted some of the purity rituals, but their resistance was shut down by rabbinical authorities (Grossman, 2003). It is therefore through the digital discourse that negotiation of the *Halachic* discourse that includes the female voice can be considered. That is, unique approaches are taken in online Q&A that allow for negotiation of norms – e.g., access for women, interactive aspects of the discourse, use of online and modern sources, and more, as will be detailed below. This chapter examines these approaches and discursive strategies, as well as the ways in which traditional power is still enacted in this digital discourse.

Unlike Pitkowsky (2011), Raucher (2015), and Gottesman (2009), this dissertation does not seek to highlight the ways in which online Q&A are inherently unique and, thus, liberating. Instead, the purpose of this chapter is to feature the ways in which both power and resistance take place online – that is, to examine the digital **discourse** (in a Foucauldian sense) and how concepts and norms of gender and sexuality

are constructed and negotiated in it. That is, I am not only looking at the ways women use online media to resist authority, but also at the ways digital media enable and strengthen existing religious worldviews. I argue in what follows, that in order to fully understand how practices and terminologies related to gender and sexuality are constructed in these online Q&A, it is not enough to point to the fact the women have access to knowledge and rabbis, or that this new medium introduces new possibilities. Rather, we need to closely and critically examine **what** is said in these Q&A by rabbis and askers, and how linguistic choices (such as words chosen and theological ideas referenced, the discursive strategies detailed later in this chapter) are used to authorize, negotiate, and resist gender and sexual norms. That is, we need to pay attention to the Foucauldian discourse. Therefore, as stated in the methods chapter, the analysis conducted in this chapter includes three layers of interpretation: first the analysis of the technological affordances, then the analysis of the religious cultural context, and finally, the analysis of the discursive strategies used within these Q&A. Since it is impossible to examine all the online *Respona* concerning all issues of gender and sexuality in this dissertation, I focus on two specific practices: the prohibitions regarding masturbation and “spilling the seed” and *Shmirat Nagiaa*, the prohibitions against physical touch between males and females. I choose these two case-studies because they have both general and specific meanings. While many religions and cultures deal with the topic of masturbation and the kinds of touch allowed between the sexes, Judaism has a specific genealogy of conceptualization and practice related to these topics found within *Respona* that informs the contemporary norms. Another reason for focusing on these

two topics is that they allow for an examination of a private practice (masturbation) and a somewhat public practice of physical touch between two persons (the person that you touch/do not touch). Lastly, these two topics are considered taboo in the Orthodox religious society, not to be discussed in public, as Orthodox Jews are restrained from speaking about sexuality (be it physical touch between people or masturbation). However, they are discussed in the Orthodox digital discourse (Theobald, 2012). While *Shmirat Negiaa* is discussed more publicly than masturbation, both topics are controversial. Yet at the same time these topics are becoming more openly negotiated in the religious sphere, partly because the Internet enables discussing these personal issues publicly (as will be seen from the material). Therefore, examining the online discussion of the taboo issues of masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa* allows for the investigation of the construction and negotiation strategies of highly contentious topics in the anonymous, “democratizing” medium (Gottesman, 2009) of online Q&A websites.

### **Genealogy of Jewish Approaches to Masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa***

Before the online Q&A dealing with these gender/sexual practices can be analyzed, it is important to provide some context into traditional religious Jewish approaches to masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa*. Male masturbation has been considered illicit in Jewish culture since biblical times (Patton, 1985). Although it is not explicitly forbidden, the biblical story of Onan can be considered the first warning against masturbation (Genesis 38). In this story, Onan decides to “spill his seed” instead of

impregnating his dead brother's wife, Tamar, and as a result, "What he did was evil in the Lord's sight, so the Lord killed him" (Genesis 38:10). In a *Talmudic* discussion, the rabbis are divided about what Onan's sin was – was it spilling his seed, or not giving Tamar (and therefore, his dead brother) a child? In any case, the name Onan becomes synonymous with masturbation in the Hebrew word *Onanut* (masturbation). Another Biblical law dictates that seed spilled during the night (a "wet dream") requires the male to clean himself in the *Mikveh* (purifying bath). These two biblical extracts have inspired *Mishanic* and *Talmudic* rabbis from the second century BC to sixth century AD to consider masturbation a negative practice, although not explicitly a forbidden one.

Later sources are clearer and stricter about this prohibition. The influential *Halachic* text *Shulchan Aruch* (d. 1565) notes, "It is prohibited to spill seed needlessly and this sin is more severe than all *Torah* transgressions." (*Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha'ezer*, 23:1). Mystical texts in Judaism, especially the *Zohar* (13<sup>th</sup> century), singled out this sin as the only sin that cannot be repented, a sin that breaks the unity between God and his people, a sin that prolongs Jewish suffering, etc. (Theobald, 2013; Krutzsch, 2014). From the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards masturbation has been considered illicit in Judaism, and it has been a taboo issue, not spoken of (Theobald, 2013).

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, masturbation was considered a severe sin, not a transgression or a "negative practice," and it has been more openly discussed as a problem. Many rabbis and religious educators see it as their goal to install in young males the conviction that masturbation is wrong and harmful. In fact, in recent times "Keeping the Covenant" (*Shmirat HaBrit*, i.e., not masturbating) has become an important topic. These trends can

be seen from the rise in published material on the topic, for example: *Guarding of the Brit* (Date Unknown), *Tikkun Habrit* (Hebrew, Yaakov Abuhatzaira, 18th century), *Sefer Shmirat HaBrit* (Natan Braslov, 1939), *The Battle of Our Generation* (anonymous, 21<sup>st</sup> century), *The Broken American Male* (Boteach, 2009), and more. Aside from the printed material, one can also find offline and online organizations that seek to “cure” this problem. For example, the organization GuardYourEyes.com, is dedicated to providing tools and techniques for Jews suffering from addiction to pornography and masturbation. According to their website, this organization is “the number one resource for dealing with the growing problem of the struggle with addiction to inappropriate materials on the internet and related behaviors in our communities” (GYE, 2016). That is, GuardYourEyes.com alongside other organizations (similar organizations include Atzatanefesh.org, Shomreybrit.com, and Briskodesh.org), see masturbation as a growing problem, an epidemic that needs to be stopped, and they take an active stance trying to prevent this behavior.

Female masturbation, although not illegal, is also considered immoral. This is because “This passion should be kept to add love and devotion between a man and his wife, and not to satisfy selfish lust” (Melamed, 2016). This prohibition has become more explicit and serious in recent years. The *Talmudic* rabbis do not see female masturbation as a problem (*Niddah*, 13:a – in a discussion about checking if a woman is bleeding or not, it is mentioned that women can touch and check themselves “in that place.”) In contemporary Judaism, rabbis have been more overt about the prohibition, although a variety of opinions can still be found, with some rabbis allowing but not encouraging it,



some allowing it only for the purposes of procreation and the commandment of *Oana*, to sexually satisfying one's wife. (In this case the wife can masturbate, but it is the intercourse with her husband that should lead to the orgasm.) Some rabbis completely deny it. Unlike young boys who are educated "not to touch that place" and to beware of masturbation, young females do not receive sexual education (aside from being taught to dress modestly), and the topic of female masturbation is, in most religious places, an ignored topic.

Abstinence, or *Shmirat Negiaa* (keeping the touch) or *Isor Negiaa* (prohibiting the touch), is a religious concept that has been rapidly evolving in the last few decades. The modern-day Jewish Orthodox sense of abstinence is simple: You cannot touch the other sex if the individual in question is not your spouse. This includes no pre-marital intimacy, no hugging, and even no hand holding or hand shaking. The purpose of this prohibition is to prevent unmarried people from having intercourse out of wedlock, and in this way, it is similar to the contemporary Christian idea of abstinence. But it differs in two ways: first, *Shmirat Negiaa* should be practiced not only with intimate touch, but any touch between people of the opposite sex. Second, *Shmirat Negiaa* can also refer to touch between a married couple, such as when the woman is having her period. During the menstruation and seven "clean" days thereafter (before she washes in the ritual bath) a wife and a husband cannot touch each other. This is usually referred to as *Niddah*, but users might sometimes ask questions about *Shmirat Negiaa* between a married couple.

The genealogy of *Shmirat Negiaa* tells a story of a growing strictness concerning the relationship between the sexes. The source of *Shmirat Negiaa* is the biblical verse:

“None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness” (Leviticus 18:6, *English Standard Bible*). That is, one should not “approach” – i.e., touch/have sexual relation with one’s relatives. It is also prohibited to “approach” a married woman. Approaching, or in other translations, “coming near” (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*) is the reason for the prohibition (*Isor*) to touch. Historically, rabbis disagree about what kind of touch is discussed. For some (such as Maimonides) the touch discussed is “a touch of lust,” while for others (such as Nahmanides) the prohibition is only for actual sexual acts. In both cases, however, necessary touch (for example, between a doctor and a patient) and what can be considered “casual” touch (a handshake) are not prohibited. With unmarried women, the situation is a bit different, since they usually do not wash after their period, and as such are under the category of *Niddah* and forbidden for touch.

One must also recall that in most Jewish contexts in history, women and men lived in different spheres, and their paths rarely crossed. The “mixed” and relatively egalitarian society in which Orthodox Jews now live raises questions about how to differentiate between a causal touch, a loving touch, and a lustful touch. (A handshake that lasts a bit too long....) As a result, a growing number of Orthodox rabbis tend to completely ban any touch between the sexes, even between family members (cousins), to avoid a slippery slope. As can be seen from this review, for contemporary Orthodox people, masturbation is considered illicit, and touching the other sex is forbidden as well. Indeed, as will be seen from the Q&A presented, many men and women ask about touching others and themselves.

## **Analyzing Jewish Online Q&A Concerning Masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa***

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to the analysis of specific Q&A selected in order to highlight the ways gender and sex are constructed and negotiated in this discourse. The Q&A are selected from the three websites that are the focus of this dissertation: Chabad.org, Aish.com, and Kipa.co.il. Aish and Kipa have an ask-the-rabbi section on their websites, while Chabad runs a separate website called “Ask Moses” (Askmoses.org, see, Davids, 2009). On all these websites, the Q&A are tagged or categorized by topics, such as “holidays,” “intimacy,” “kosher food,” etc. (Kipa allows registered users to also add their tags to the Q&A.) While the Q&A discussed in this dissertation are sensitive in nature, they are not hidden on the websites – a simple search for words like “sex,” “masturbation,” etc. within the ask-the-rabbi sections retrieved various Q&A dealing with these topics. As discussed in the method chapter, a total of n=60 Q&A were sampled: Thirty-nine questions concern *Shmirat Negiaa* (n=18 from Kipa, n=13 from Askmoses, n=8 from Aish) and 21 concern masturbation (n=10 from Kipa, n=9 from Askmoses, n=2 from Aish). The purpose of this investigation is not to highlight the unique features of online Q&A when it comes to gender and sex (Gottesman, 2009), but to examine the ways in which the construction and negotiation of gender and sexual norms take place online. By this I mean focus is placed on the ways traditional stances are empowered and resisted in the digital discourse. The analysis of these texts follows the tri-layered critical discourse analysis model which focuses on

three aspects: 1) the technological affordances, 2) the religious cultural context, and 3) the discursive strategies employed in the negotiation of practices.

*Analysis: Technological affordances.* The first layer of the analysis focuses on the technological affordances identified in the websites studied. Technological affordances are defined as the design features of the websites and what they allow the users to practically do in relation to their postings and online engagement. In other words, “the affordances of any given object make certain actions possible, they exclude others and structure the interaction between the actor and user” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 27). In the tri-layered model, paying attention to the affordances of digital media helps the researcher explore this discourse within a larger techno-cultural context, and to do so while paying attention to how technological affordances are used to facilitate power structures, construction, and representation of cultural artifacts.

Aish, Askmoses, and Kipa all have affordances that contribute to and enable the construction of a discourse. Most notable are the sharing and commenting affordances or the lack thereof. That is, the addition of a comment feature invites users to take an active part in the construction of the *Halachic* debate, or even to resist it within the website. However, to fully understand both the developers’ intent in adding these options and the users’ motivations for using them, an in-depth investigation, including interviews with the websites’ developers must take place (see, for example, Golan and Campbell, 2015). But understanding the developers’ motivations and strategies is not the purpose of this dissertation. Rather, this dissertation is focused on analyzing the type of digital discourse that technological features and affordances enable. That is, this section describes the

affordances by considering how they contribute to the discourse – i.e., what type of discourse is enabled and how is it used.

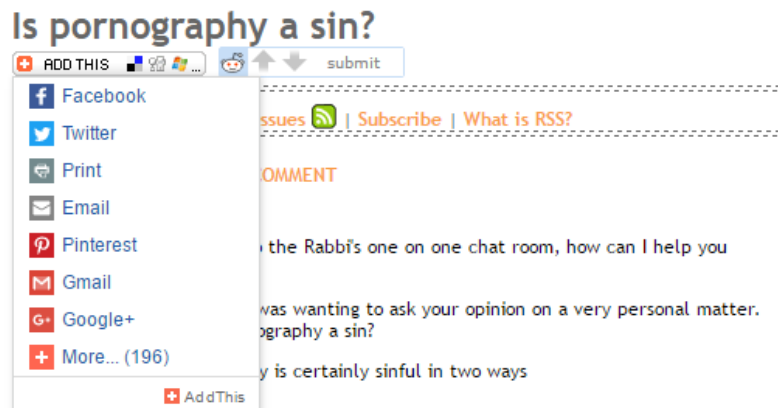
As a brief overview, it can be noted that the websites operate on a spectrum of possible engagement: Aish allows the most minimal engagement (sharing the Q&A to social media; no comment section), Kipa allows some user engagement (sharing posts, commenting on rabbi's responses), and Askmoses allows a high level of engagement (sharing, commenting, rating the Q&A, and chatting directly with a rabbi). It should be noted that all the digital *Responsa* website pages contain the question, answer, and (if there are any) comments, as well as whatever other website material is displayed (such as, for example, advertisements). Figure 5 from Aish.org exemplifies the structures these online Q&As commonly have. In what follows, I offer a thorough examination of the technological features and affordances and how they are used for each website.

Figure 5. Top of a Q&A page on Aish.com.



Askmoses, the *Responsa* website for Chabad.org, allows users to react to the Q&As presented in various ways: a user can comment on the Q&A; share the Q&A through various online platforms, from email to social media sites; submit the Q&A link to Reddit; subscribe to the website through RSS; or rate the Q&A via an internal website rating system (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. ‘Add This’ button on Askmoses.com.



At the top of each page, before reading the Q&A itself, readers are introduced to the questions header (similar to a newspaper headline) and the name of the rabbi answering. They can then share the Q&A via an “add this” button, which offers various ways of sharing: email, printing, sharing to Facebook, Twitter, and hundreds more social media sites (as seen in Figure 6). The comment option is accompanied by a “pop-up box” that includes the following posting guidelines:

- 1) This form is for article specific comments only. For general questions, website comments or to contact the AskMoses staff, please click here: AskMoses contact page
- 2) Posts written in ALL CAPS will not be posted.
- 3) Please refrain from profane, insulting or divisive language. We welcome your critique of the article or of other posted comments, but ask that you do so in a respectful and civil manner.
- 4) Stay on the subject. The purpose of this forum is to discuss the ideas and issues raised in this specific article and the other reader posts, not to serve as a sounding board for your opinions on other matters.
- 5) Keep it short. The shorter your comments, the greater the chances that they will be posted. This “Post a Comment” form will only handle submissions of up to 1000 characters.
- 6) Please check the spelling and grammar of your post. The more

readable it is, the more useful it will be to the discussion.  
(Askmoses.com)

As can be seen from these guidelines, while users are encouraged to comment and take part in the conversation, Askmoses retains the right to not post any comment deemed unsuitable,. They try to foster a befitting interaction, one respectful to both the rabbis answering and the users reading, as can be seen from guideline number 3 specifically, but also in spirit in guidelines 2 and 6.

Figure 7. Rating button on Askmoses.com.



There is no way to know how many users shared an article to all the possible social media websites, or even to one specific website. (Askmoses does not publish the number of shares to, for example, Facebook.) Therefore, it is hard to estimate how sharing was employed by users on this website or which Q&A got shared on other platforms. While it is not possible to follow shares on other social media sites, the Reddit page to which a Q&A article was submitted is hyperlinked to that Q&A, making it accessible to anyone reading it. Out of the n=21 Q&A articles in the sample, three were submitted to Reddit: one to an atheism page and two to a page titled WTF (What The F\*\*K). It is quite clear that the Reddit shares were not in support of the religious website, but mocked it, suggesting the material was probably posted by non-Orthodox.



Therefore, the Reddit pages are an interesting option, as in all the three cases in this sample they were explicitly against the Askmoses rabbis and mindset. For example: “Moronic [...] So basically the idiotic reasoning behind this is if you are told to do something, implied in that command is a command to not do ANYTHING else but what you were told to do exactly? F\*\*ktardy” (Reddit.r/WTF, 2009). This use of the sharing feature can indicate a few things: the designers of the website were either unaware of the negative, “trolling” risks of allowing online sharing. It is also possible that even if they were aware, they decided that the ability to share is more important than the risk involved. The Reddit postings also indicate that the Q&A on this website function not only as a Jewish Chabad communal source, but also as material that non-community users interact with. In this way, this technological feature and the way it is used reveals a strong tendency towards sharing and spreading this information. The Chabad/Askmoses designers seem to value sharing capacities offered online and utilize them in their website. Regardless of the reasoning behind this design, the design features create a digital discourse that is open to communal and outsider interaction. These technological features enact a discourse focused on sharing and spreading the Q&A. That is, the digital discourse here is not elite or closed, but rather tries to be open and spreadable, something that can be shared between lay people and even non-communal people.

Askmoses’ internal rating system is not explicitly explained; that is, there are no clear rubrics about how an article is rated, and so it is impossible to determine why users may rate an Q&A “high” or “low,” give it one or five stars. Twenty out of the n=21 Q&A in the sample are rated, with the number of people rating ranging from five to

n=52. The ratings fall between 2.5-5.0 stars, with an average of 4 stars. Unlike the comment section, which has clear guidelines, the rating system lacks any explanations, rationale, or policies. It is possible that this rating system imitates rating systems available on general Q&A websites, such as Yahoo Answers. In Yahoo Answers, the rating system helps users evaluate the quality or value of the answer offered, without commenting on the question. That is, in Yahoo Answers users can rate the different answers, thus creating a competition between answers, and the higher-rated answers are presented first. On the AskMoses website, however, the question and answer are rated together. Since the website only offers one answer (the rabbi's answer), there is no competition between answers, and the rating system seems unnecessary. It can be assumed that users would likely rate a Q&A higher if they agree with the question or are satisfied by the answer – if they “found it helpful” (as noted in one of the comments) – however, that is an assumption that can only be confirmed through interviews. Rating both the question and answer could indicate that site designers treat the question and answer as one, similar to an article. That is, users rate the question and answer as one, and rating comments, for example, is not possible. This makes sense, considering the fact that the rabbi's answer has an epistemological power and authority in Judaism (Doscik, 2010). This use of the technology hints that although some feedback is appreciated, there is no real place for competition between different answers – commenters are not meant to supply an alternative answer, and if they do, that answer is in the comment section, and thus, not rate-able. In this way, the rating system either does not make sense or is not meant to create a competitive assessment of the Q&A.

Figure 8. Q&A page on Kipa.co.il. English translation in black offered by the author of this dissertation.

שאל את הרב

Ask The Rabbi

אש > שאל את הרב > מכירת חמץ

מכירת חמץ

**Q&A Title**

**Question**

תוכן השאלה:  
שלום כבוד הרב  
אם ביצעתי מכירת חמץ דרך האתר כיפה ואמר שהחמץ ימכר ביום שני בבוקר ושעוד אז יש לרכז אותו  
האם עד אז מותר לאכול מהחמץ עד שני בבוקר?

תודה רבה

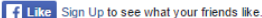
**Answer**



תוכן התשובה:  
מפאת חוסר זמן אענה בקצרה.  
החמץ מותר לשימוש ולאכילה עד יום שני בבוקר בשעה 10:00.  
שבת שלום

**Rabbi's Name,  
Hebrew Date**

התשובה התקבלה מהרב חנן שוקרון  
בתאריך י"א ניסן תשע"ז

הוספת תגית



In sum, Askmoses enables various features for engagement: commenting, sharing, rating, etc. – thus enabling a discourse that is, at the very least, interactive. However, it is unclear if some of the features, such as the rating or the Reddit share were carefully considered, and how they might contribute to the discourse. When it comes to the comments feature, the creators of Askmoses had clearly thought about how they wanted to communicate the way users should use and engage with the website, and the fact that website editors should retain the right to not post certain comments. Generally speaking, Chabad (Askmoses) enables a participatory, or at least, interactive discourse.

The Kipa.co.il website offers similar ways users can react with Q&A articles – a Facebook “like” button, the ability to print or save a Q&A to the users’ Kipa page, or the

ability to comment on the Q&A, using a Kipa internal username, Facebook profile, or anonymously. All of these options are available only at the end of the Q&A webpage (not at the top of the page, like on Askmoses), indicating perhaps an attempt to have users read the Q&A before interacting with it (see Figure 8). On Kipa, one can log into the website using a username and password. Users can register at any point during their interaction with the website, but similar to other websites where a login is an option, registration and logging in are not automatic and require the user's active choice. In addition to the option to comment automatically, this gives the user the added option of having their personalized page on Kipa, with a message board, a favorites section in which they can save articles and Q&A, and the option to add tags to any specific Q&A or article. Therefore, it can be argued that users who login to the Kipa website can take a more active part in the construction of the discourse, as the action of tagging the Q&A can be thought of as an act of sense making (for example, the choice to tag a given Q&A with "sexuality," "intimacy," or "modesty"). The registered users-only option of tagging and creating a personalized web-space indicates the website designers imagine this site as an internal/communal digital space. That is, users are encouraged to actively interact in the digital community by using their website-specific login username.

However, in the Q&A section, most people react either anonymously, or using a one-time username (such as S or Thanks!). In the sample collected for this dissertation, out of n=49 comments total, only one person reacted using their Facebook profile, and two people commented using their Kipa profiles. The fact that not many users reacted using their Kipa or Facebook profiles might indicate that the option of anonymity is

helpful when taboo issues of sexuality are discussed. However, it could also have to do with the relative ease of anonymous reaction, which does not require a login username or password. Although the affordances of username and digital communal tagging exist, in the Q&A sample it is the affordance of anonymity that is adopted by most users. Furthermore, in this sample not even one of the Q&A is “liked” on Facebook. (In comparison, the articles sampled for the next chapter all received some likes on Facebook.) This could be a result of the sensitive topics of these Q&A, but it could also be that users do not tend to share or like the questions they ask rabbis, or religious Q&A in general.

On Kipa.co.il overall, the discourse enabled is one that is interactive only through comments, and not through sharing or rating. That is, while users can like a Q&A on Facebook, sharing is not an option. Unlike the Chabad features, which allow a spreadable discourse, the technological features on the Kipa website enable a discourse in which sharing is more difficult. That does not necessarily make this site less participatory – in fact, Kipa has n=49 of the total comments in this sample, while Chabad (Askmoses) has n=32. (Aish does not allow comments at all.) It does, however, create a discourse in which user participation is mostly through using active “production” tools (users have to write), versus more passive tools (users click a button to “share” or “rate”).

Aish.com is the most restricted when it comes to interactive features in their Q&A section. Each Q&A webpage offers the ability to share the Q&A through the “add this” button (similar to the button offered on Askmoses.com), which allows for sharing

in about 195 social media outlets (highlighting Facebook, Twitter, see Figure 6 above), and the ability to print and email the Q&A article. Commenting on or rating the Q&A are not available features. There are other actions that the website's features allow for: asking the rabbi and searching the Q&A archive (both of which are also available on Kipa.co.il and Askmoses.com), examining most recent questions submitted to Aish.com or general Aish.com articles related to the topic of the Q&A, subscribing to Aish.com email list, or donating to Aish.com are all options presented to the users as they scroll down the Q&A page (see Figure 9). The reaction options to the Q&A – that is, sharing, emailing, or printing the Q&A article – are presented at the top of the page (so they're seen before reading the Q&A article) and again at the bottom of the page, after the Q&A. Thus, these features are pushed, and engaging through sharing is encouraged by the repetition.

Figure 9. Bottom of a Q&A page on Aish.com



The lack of commenting features are important to note, especially in comparison to Askmoses.com or Kipa.co.il. Perhaps Aish.com designers wanted users to engage in a more passive fashion – by consuming the material rather than posting their reactions to it. This could indicate that the website designers were not interested in creating an active online community. What is mostly enabled and encouraged through these technological features is a spreadable and “top-down” discourse – Aish.com allows users to promote the website’s religious content, perhaps as part of *Aish HaTorah’s kiruv* (missionary) attitude, previously discussed in the introduction and method chapter. Thus, the technological affordances implemented in Aish’s Q&A section enable a discourse in which interaction is minimalized but promoting the religious content is encouraged.

Aside from the features unique to each of the websites, all three websites share two features: the ability to send in a question, and the ability to explore the archive of past questions posted to the websites. That is, the interactive aspects of the discourse are not only in reacting but also in enacting – that is, in asking the question. The website managers depend, to some degree, on users asking questions if they want their websites to be popular. Therefore, aside from the relatively extensive comment options and sharing features, it is worth noting the design and affordances that invite the users to **ask**. As argued elsewhere, “the design of their [Q&A websites] interfaces include blank spaces for posting questions, attractive buttons for question submission, and the ability to publish previously asked questions. Furthermore, even while looking at previous questions, the ‘ask a question’ button is always near – continuously inviting the user to add questions” (Tsuria, 2016, p. 5). This is not surprising, considering the fact that these websites are designed for questions and answers. But the website editors have the option of not publishing questions related to sexual or taboo issues. The decision to publish these questions is the first enabler of a digital discourse about gender and sex via Q&A, and while questions about gender and sex are not the only ones posted, they are published and users react to them.

Furthermore, all three websites offer an archive of the Q&A posted. This might be included for various reasons from the websites designers’ side, but regardless of reason, these archives allow for a “fossilized” collection, documentation that makes possible the construction of a digital discourse on gender and sexual issues. By having both the “live” option to send a question to a rabbi, and the “off the air” option of



searching through an archive, these Q&A websites serve both as direct transmitters of information between user and rabbi, and as preservers of information, as libraries of religious discourse. However, especially on Kipa.co.il and Askmoses.com, where the technological features support engaged interaction – ask, comment, share – reading through the Q&A archives is different from reading a *Responsa* book. Even if users merely browse or read without engaging, the option to engage is constantly present. Therefore, I argue, the experience of digital *Responsa* is one that is more inclusive and participatory, and thus is a part of a communal discourse.

In summary, when viewed together the three websites' design features enable a discourse that is interactive either through sharing or through commenting/rating. This is important to keep in mind when considering the negotiation and construction of gender and sexuality for several reasons. First, the interactive options expand the creation of knowledge, not only at the hand of the rabbis, but also at the hands of the users commenting and sharing. Thus, power in this digital discourse is already negotiated because the rabbi's answer does not appear in an elite vacuum but in a hyperlinked, asynchronistic "space," where an answer given three years ago can be presently addressed by any user. In this discourse, taboo questions and issues of gender and sexuality are more easily raised, and it is the rabbis as well as the users who react to these sensitive topics. As discussed in the literature review, technologies have the potential to shift existing gender structures and the ways that they are used. Here, the technological affordance of anonymity allows women to ask questions directly to a Rabbi and also react to these and other *Halachic* rulings through the comment section.

However, the ability of these women to post anonymous questions does not necessarily result in a challenge or diminishment of rabbinical authority. As argued by Balsamo, shapers of technology already work within a hierarchical and gendered mindset, and consequently such shapers would tend to reproduce patriarchal structures (Balsamo, 1996). In fact, it can be argued that constant access to rabbis through digital media only increases their authority. Regardless, online, their authority operates in a digital discourse that also assumes and promotes users' reactions. Thus, the negotiation of gender and sexual norms in the Orthodox Jewish digital discourse is openly accessible, public, and participatory. That means the negotiation and construction of gender and sex are not at the hands of the religious authority; the implications of these technological affordances are that this negotiation is entrusted to "everyone and yet no one in particular" (Bartsky, 1990, p. 74).

This does not necessarily mean that the religious hierarchies become obsolete. In fact, as will be seen from the discursive analysis, in their questions and comments users show a respectful attitude toward rabbis and seem to accept (and defend!) their authority and rulings. Instead, I suggest we think of this inclusive digital *Responsa* as a communal discourse, a discourse in the making. Regardless of the topic discussed, these technological features frame the user experience as interactive and websites' expectations seem to be that the material is shared and spread. In this participatory discourse, I suggest, traditional gender and sexual practices and norms are not necessarily explicitly undermined or defied, but are to some degree negotiated and reconstructed. These technological features of sharing and interacting set the stage for

the type of engagement that creates an interactive digital discourse. However, the ways these communities/users utilize these affordances is an important part of the analysis and reveal a participation that supports empowering, rather than resisting, traditional norms. Thus, analyzing the technological affordances and how they are used to create and answer communal needs serves only as the background for the linguistic choices, discursive strategies, and religious negotiation of sexual and gender norms.

***Analysis: cultural context.*** After analyzing the technological aspects of the discourse, the tri-layered approach suggests we need to explore the (cultural) religious terminology and how it is used in the discourse. Religious terminology refers to language derived from religious canonic texts (such as the *Torah* and *Halachic* texts), specific religious terms and how they are used (such as “sin” or “holy,” for example), and more generally, religious theology (such as, for example, the concept of holiness or a discussion of messianic times). That is, this section examines religious words, concepts and citations from religious literature associated with Orthodox faith and teachings. This is important because in studying Orthodox digital discourse, there is a need to consider what are the Orthodox or religious concepts and how are they used in this sample of the Orthodox online Q&A. As reviewed above, both sexual norms explored in this chapter – masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa* (touching) – are noted within biblical sources, but have received more attention in modernity. These are considered both private and intimate/personal issues, and as such, are hard to discuss openly in the Orthodox community (Theobald, 2013). Online, these issues can be asked about and discussed anonymously. This subsection or layer of analysis examines what role religious texts,

concepts, and terminology play in the online construction and negotiation of masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa*.

Generally, it has been argued by rabbis and Orthodox community members that instructions or advice given within online Q&A tend to be less religiously strict than their offline alternatives (offline *Responsa* or speaking to a rabbi face to face). Some rabbis further expressed a worry that these online answers tend to be more influenced by popular opinion, pay less attention to *Halachic* tradition, and as a result, are more lenient (Cohen, 2008). Steinitz (2011) pointed out that the genre of online *Responsa* differs from that of traditional *Responsa* in its shorter length, lack of *Halachic* sources (traditional *Responsa* usually rely heavily on *Talmudic* and *Halachic* texts) and disregards the context. The lack of *Halachic* sources and general “short” attitude was found also in this sample. However, contrary to the rabbis’ fears, most of the answers concerning masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa* tend to be severe rather than moderate, as will be shown in this analysis.

This section of analysis examines the religious cultural context as presented by all three websites on the topics of masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa* as a single discourse. In the above section, focusing on technological affordances, it made sense to examine each website first individually in order to describe in detail the nuances of how each visually presents Q&A, before considering the discourse the technological affordances enable. When the three websites’ affordances are compared, they together create a participatory discourse. However, in this layer of analysis, as well the discursive strategies layer, it is not the nuances of each individual website, but rather the general

discourse that is common among all three websites that is the focus of the dissertation. That being said, since the websites do have differences, those will be discussed at the end of each section.

Generally, out of overall sample of Q&A discussed in this chapter (n=60), sixteen have some references to *Halachic* sources. More specifically, out of the n=39 Q&A related to *Shmirat Negiaa*, thirteen had *Halachic* sources; and out of the n=21 Q&A related to masturbation, five had *Halachic* sources. By reference to *Halachic* sources, I mean that the rabbi answering a question either cites or mentions a text from the *Torah*, *Mishna*, *Talmud*, or later rabbinical *Halachic* sources in their response. I am not including references to inspirational or religious self-help books. The citation can include a quote or just refer to a specific book and verse, but I did not count instances in which *Halacha* is mentioned where the rabbi does not clearly supply a source reference (for example, “it says in the *Torah*” will not be counted; “it says in the *Torah*, Genesis 3:11” will be counted). Most of the time, the sources are cited without much deliberation or explanation. For example:

Q: Where does the Torah say masturbation is a sin?

A: Genesis 38:7-10 “Now Er, Judah’s firstborn, was evil in the eyes of the Lord... Now Onan knew that the progeny would not be his, and it came about, when he came to his [deceased] brother’s wife, he wasted [his semen] on the ground... Now what he did was evil in the eyes of the Lord...” Rashi (based on the *Talmud*) comments about Er: “His evil was like the evil of Onan, viz. that he wasted his semen... Now, why would Er waste his semen? So that she (Tamar) would not become pregnant and her beauty be impaired”. (Chein, n.d.)

While Rashi’s interpretation of the sin of Er and Onan is given, the rabbi answering does not provide any further interpretation or modern sources. He also omits the possibility

discussed in other rabbinical sources that Onan's sin was not giving children to his dead brother via impregnating his wife (and not masturbation). In that way, the rabbi frames the story as a *Torah* prohibition against masturbation, while the biblical story is less clear and has been interpreted differently by other scholars. The *Halachic* source is then used not for debate and negotiation, but as a stark evidence for the rabbi's position.

While most Q&A do not cite *Halachic* sources, or cite them briefly, a few Q&A do go to the trouble of examining the *Halachic* discourse:

Victor: I've searched through the Torah thoroughly and can't find a single prohibition of premarital sex with a single woman, especially if she's not a virgin. Why do orthodox Jews think there shouldn't be premarital sex [?]

Rabbi Latowicz: Hi. Maimonides writes that non-marital intercourse falls under the Biblical prohibition of "there shall not be any promiscuous men among the Jewish people; nor shall there be any promiscuous women among the Jewish people" (Deut. 23:18). Nachmanides disagrees with this derivation, maintaining that the prohibition is implicit in the Biblical injunction "And the earth shall not be filled with immorality" (Lev. 19; 29). The Raavad, according to most authorities, deduces it directly from the command to marry. Implicit in the command to marry, he says, is a prohibition of all nonmarital [sic] intercourse. [...] It seems clear that all authorities forbid nonmarital [sic] intercourse; the only dispute revolves about the precise biblical source. (Askmoses, 2017)

In this example the rabbi does provide hints at the various *Halachic* disagreements, although he is still keeping his reply relatively short, perhaps keeping in mind the internet culture of "tltr" (too long to read). While he does provide the biblical sources, the later rabbinical sources, such as the writings of Maimonides, Nachmanides, Raavad, and Rashi are mentioned but not cited. This means the reader must accept the rabbi's interpretation of these sources, and leaves little room for negotiation of the textual

authorities. Similarly, other online Q&A make vague allusions to other Judaic texts without citing or directly quoting the specific verse, as in the following examples:

A: ... From the standpoint of Jewish law, Maimonides (in *Mishneh Torah* – Laws of Marriage) cites Deuteronomy 22:13 as a scriptural prohibition against any pleasurable contact between a man and woman (other than those who are married or close relatives). (see also Leviticus 18:6) It's what God wants and we get pleasure out of doing what God wants us to do even if we don't understand it. (Aish, 2017b)

\* \* \*

A: In the Halachic perspective, as you yourself said – any touch between men and women is forbidden. There is no disagreement on this. Ashkenazi, Sephardim, Yemenites, Indians – and any other Jewish diasporic community [agrees]. In the *Shulchan Aruch* it is ruled – “A man needs to stay away from the women very very much and should not wink [signal] with his hands or legs and hint...” And Also – “Even hugging and kissing and enjoying the closeness of flesh is faulty.” There is some disagreement if the ban is from the Torah or from the Rabbis, but it is forbidden. (Kipa, 2017a)

In these examples the rabbis do mention *Halachic* sources, such as the *Shulchan Aruch* or *Mishneh Torah* but fail to provide the exact source, making it more difficult to follow up in the discussion and easier to accept the answers. In Judaism, it is customary in *Halachic* debates and *Responsa* to provide sources and complete citations, and failing to do so is telling. It is worth mentioning that in *Talmudic* and *Mishnaic* texts, and many times in oral conversations, rabbis and learned people do not mention the place mark even when they recite canonic sources, since they are so familiar with them. However, in traditional *Responsa* literature by and large, rabbis share *Halachic* sources as part of the legal discussion (to support their ruling, to show their opinion is based on previous *Halachic* discussions) and to show their own knowledge (Steinitz, 2011; Goldish, 2008). Traditionally *Responsa* was written by rabbis for rabbis (Hass, 1996), and thus it served

the role of providing evidence for ruling on certain issues, as well as for legal debates. It was a tool for shaping the *Halachic* discourse. Online, in most cases, the askers are not rabbis, nor are they interested in a long *Halachic* negotiation. The rabbis answering are meant to provide a clear answer, with some basic explanation. This is perhaps an outcome of the medium of online Q&A, which tends to afford shorter discussions and more personalized, clear instructions (Nachtstern, 2008, Steinitz, 2011). Since traditional *Responsa* was mostly an elite discussion, grounding your position in *Halachic* texts and interpretation was an important part of the religious cultural context of these offline *Responsa* (Gottesman, 2009). In online Q&A, however, based on the kind of response offered by rabbis on these websites, it seems that using religious texts to contextualize their responses is not seen as necessary. Perhaps the rabbis here are so familiar with the related *Halachic* text, that they see no reason to mention the place mark in their response, and either don't care about the readers' familiarity, or assume the readers are also familiar with these texts. Then again, perhaps they think one can at relative ease search for the citation (maybe even via digital sources). Or perhaps they believe their authority in mentioning the text is enough. In any case, the end result from a discursive analysis point of view is that the rabbis' authority is strengthened insofar as they are the persons possessing, creating, and controlling knowledge. Furthermore, the rabbis' use and interpretation of the religious texts typically suggest one possible interpretation. The meaning of the religious, *Halachic* texts and terms then become more literal and less flexible, a monosemic and less of a polysemic text. For example, as in the case mentioned in the beginning of this section (Chein, n.d.), the rabbi's reading of the story



of Onan offers only one possible interpretation, thus minimalizing the possible meanings of the text. In this fashion, rabbis answering throughout the sample tend to represent canonic and *Halachic* texts as having only one meaning (monosemic) and disregard the multiple meanings that these texts have traditionally received throughout Jewish history (Dosick, 1995).

While this general lack of *Halachic* sources and monosemic use of religious texts are true when examining the discourse as a whole, investigating each website separately reveals some important nuances. Most notably, while Askmoses and Kipa have a similar ratio of Q&A with *Halachic* sources to Q&A with no sources (n=5 out of n=28 in Kipa's sample have sources, about 18%; and n=6 out of n=22 for Askmoses, about 26%), Aish cites *Halachic* sources in five out of ten Q&A, a ratio of 50%. That is, Aish's rabbis use the most *Halachic* sources in this sample. Coupled with the fact that Aish does not allow comments, as discussed in the previous section, it looks like Aish is attempting to construct a more traditional epistemic rabbinical authority – one that is based on *Halachic* knowledge and that should be accepted (and not negotiated through the comment section). Another interesting point is that both Kipa's and Aish's rabbis supply more sources when discussing *Shmirat Negiaa* (no touching) than masturbation. This could be because the issue of *Shmirat Negiaa* is less clear to users, and they ask for clarifications and reasons, which rabbis supply through *Halachic* texts.

Aside from the minimal and monosemic use of religious texts and terminologies, rabbis answering questions online also use other online or modern sources, sometimes complementing the religious sources and reasoning, and sometimes replacing them. The

references to new, modern books tend to be more moralistic than *Halachic*. For example, answering a fifteen-years-old who is having difficulties keeping *Shmirat Negiaa*, the rabbi and other users in comments recommend a popular book. The person asking described herself as someone that is battling with the importance of keeping *Shmirat Negiaa*, looking for a (religious) reason to keep doing it, saying, “I realized that actually I don’t really have a good reason (that makes sense in today’s reality)...” (Harman, 2010). As an answer, instead of a long discussion of the reasons and importance (that can be found in other online Q&A), the rabbi referred her to a modern booklet:

A (rabbi): Get and read the excellent booklet ‘The Magic Touch’. It will really help you.

Comment 1: Recommended!! [...]

Comment 2: Really :) This is a very very beautiful and fascinating booklet, girls... you should [read it] – it strengthens and reinforces the fact that you must keep *Negiah*!!! (Harman, 2010)

While the rabbi’s reference to a modern book might seem dismissive, in fact other users reading this answer support it and encourage not just this person, but anyone (“girls...”) to read it. In this case, the online *Halachic* discourse receives support from the offline printed booklet. While this example refers online readers to offline sources, there are also examples of rabbis referring to other online sources: either additional digital Q&A, or other websites. For example, in an answer regarding *Shmirat Negiaa*, the Aish rabbi suggests a modern book and supplies the URL: “There is a small but powerful book called, ‘The Magic Touch,’ by Gila Manolson, which discusses this topic in-depth. See excerpts online at: <http://innernet.org.il/innerSearch.php?author=10>” (Aish, 2017b). Or,

answering a question concerning female masturbation, a Kipa rabbi opens his answer by directing the reader to other online Q&As' URL:

First of all, please see the answers that were written in this website on the topics, such as my answers:

<http://www.kipa.co.il/ask/show.asp?id=27355>,

<http://www.kipa.co.il/ask/show.asp?id=9065>. And also in:

<http://www.kipa.co.il/ask/show.asp?id=2383>

<http://www.kipa.co.il/ask/show.asp?id=9954> (Eliyahu, 2004)

The rabbi goes on to supply a detailed answer (408 words long), but seems to still have the need to link and share the other online sources. The hyperlinked sources might act to strengthen the rabbi's own online presence and, as a result, online authority (Campbell, 2010a). Furthermore, using other online religious sources implicitly sanctifies the Internet as a source for religious knowledge and learning. Whether this is done out of ease, necessity, or ideology, the outcome is that readers are encouraged by rabbis to spend more time accessing religious terminology and knowledge online or in modern sources than reading the offline, traditional, religious *Halachic* text. The use of "scientific" or modern language, such as, for example, terms like "hormones," or referring to modern books such as "The Magic Touch," is not as common as the discussion of the *Torah* or God, or the effects of sexuality on one's soul, all of which emphasize the religious worldview. However, these modern terms are an interesting addition to the discourse, a modern supplement to the traditional religious language.

The use of modern sources, ideas, and terminology varies between the websites. For example, out of the n=28 questions from Kipa, three refer to a psychologist or counselor, and one mentions a scientific experiment. In the English-based questions on Aish and Askmoses, out of n=32 questions total, seven mention a psychologist or

counselor, and four use scientific terms (e.g., hormones). That is, by and large, Aish and Askmoses seem more comfortable using modern and secular ideas. This makes sense in light of the fact that these websites are meant to be accessible to non-religious Jews, as discussed in the method chapter, and as such, need to use language that would make sense to a general audience.

While the religious language and terminology are to some extent minimized (not used so often) in online *Responsa*, especially if compared to traditional *Responsa*, it does not lose its power in this discourse. In fact, it can be argued that the religious discourse presented in these online Q&A is less complicated than previous Jewish legal debates (Steinitz, 2011), and as a result, flattens the religious discussion and constructs a religious worldview that is monosemic. While traditional *Responsa* presents a complicated religious and legal system (Hass, 1996), online, the religious cultural context is simplified and disregards the complexity of *Halachic* or lived contexts. This is exemplified in the answers that position God as the simple and absolute reason to maintain these religious sexual norms, for example: “It’s what God wants and we get pleasure out of doing what God wants us to do even if we don’t understand it” (Aish, 2017b). Or “...Who said that it is so bad? If something is enjoyable it does not necessarily mean it is bad... we have a simple answer... Blessed Be He [God]!” (Kipa, 2017a).

In sum, the religious cultural context in this discourse includes online and modern sources and minimizes *Halachic* legal discussion. Both the online/modern sources and the reduced use of *Halachic* sources contribute to a discourse that is

monosemic and has a clear stance regarding sexual norms – a strict, severe read of the religious sources that prohibit “liberal” notions of sexuality and declare masturbation or touch between the sexes as firmly forbidden. The religious worldview that frames these prohibitions is one that constructs an Orthodox discourse in which God’s word is clear, and legal *Halachic* rulings are not up for discussion. The following section portrays how within the religious (strict and literal) and technological (interactive and shared) discourse described so far, users and rabbis employ various discursive strategies to construct and negotiate sexual and gender norms.

***Analysis: Discursive strategies.*** This layer of the tri-layered critical discourse analysis focuses on the discursive strategies employed by rabbis and users to maintain or resist the prohibition on masturbation and the need to keep *Shmirat Negiaa*. Discursive strategies refers to the types of arguments, word choices, and implicit or explicit assumptions rabbis and users implement; and more generally, how users and rabbis tend to understand and describe their actions cornering gender and sexuality (Foucault, 1977). I suggest exploring the negotiation and construction of the sexual norms in three elements of the Q&A: in the question asked, in the answer given, and in the reactions to the Q&A if afforded by the website. Thus, each Q&A webpage is divided into three components: (1) question, (2) answer, and (3) comments. Breaking down the Q&A into these three parts helps illustrate specific ways in which people ask questions (for example, do users respect rabbinical authority in their questions? Do they assume sexuality is bad? Do they frame their question as a taboo or an acceptable topic? Etc.); the specific strategies the rabbis use to answer (Are they firm or soft in their tone? Do

they speak explicitly or implicitly about sexuality? Etc.); and the specific attitudes reflected in the comment sections (Do users agree with the answer or reject it? Do they add questions? Do they express gratitude or embarrassment? Etc.). The following section explores each of these Q&A elements and highlights the linguistic and discursive strategies in them using critical discourse analysis. Since this dissertation attempts to explore overall discourse, and not the specific negotiation for each of these Orthodox groups (Chabad, Aish, and Kipa), I begin by examining the questions, answers, and comments in all three websites together – the styles and discursive strategies presented in all three websites. One should keep in mind that since these are all Orthodox websites, a user might ask about an issue of gender and sex on all three websites. However, keeping in mind the fact that these websites are also different and serve specific Orthodox communities, I add a brief discussion of the individual approaches taken in each website at the end of each subsection.

*Questions.* Unlike other sections on the religious websites, in which the website editors or religious leaders decide about the topics worthy of consideration (such sections will be analyzed in the next chapter), the Q&A sections discussed in this chapter are more of a bottom-up, grassroots type of knowledge creation. That is, the users' questions initiate the discussion of topics – including taboo ones such as gender and sexual norms. Of course, the website editors still have the choice to publish or not publish a given question, and the “correct” knowledge is still at the hand of the experts – the rabbis. Therefore, it would be more precise to think of the questions posted as knowledge creation that includes anonymous, user-based concerns filtered through

editorial agendas and policies (such as the ones mentioned in the technological affordances section). In other words, while the users ask the questions, and thus dictate the topics of discussion, the website editors and rabbis are the ones that dictate what to think about these topics.

In this bottom-up Q&A system, the topics the users choose to bring up tend to be personal and sensitive. Because of the way the sample was created, i.e., by only choosing questions related to on masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa*, all of the questions are already sensitive in their nature. While some users ask about a general topic, such as “What is the *Torah* source prohibiting premarital sex?” many of the questions, although anonymous, are very personal. The following questions are a good example of shared personal dilemmas:

Q: I have a question: I am not promiscuous and I have never been. I really only want to have sex with the girl I love and who will be my wife when married. I love her so much and I am going to marry her (I promised this and I will keep it, and so did she). [W]hy must I wait until the actual wedding, why can't we be intimate now? (Askmoses, 2017a)

Q: My boyfriend just got a new job and will be moving to my city. He says that it's time we start living together. The idea seems to have advantages – shared expenses, and we can spend more time together. But I'm wondering if there is a downside to this as well? (Aish, 2017c)

Although the persons asking do not reveal any identifying details, they are sharing intimate details about their lives and life choices. In the first example, the asker also seems to be resisting the notion of *Shmirat Negiaa*, i.e., claiming one should be able to touch the other sex, regardless of marriage. In fact, in his chat with the religious authority, he constantly pushes back against the idea of *Shmirat Negiaa*, saying God knows about their true love and there is no need to wait for the legality of the marriage.

The second user, on the other hand, seems to be seeking a support for a more traditional life choice (e.g., not living together). While the second user can be considered accepting of traditional gender norms, and the first user explicitly rejects the religious/traditional practices, some users' negotiations are more complex. For example, the user in the following example exposes her pain (also while keeping anonymous), and in doing so attempts a soft resistance/negotiation of the norms:

Q: So far I have no problem with it [gender segregation and modesty], it's not hard for me. But last year I had a dream to surf. It's something I really really [sic] want.... I even started saving money for [a surfing] class, but then I thought about modesty [and not being around boys].... I don't have where to surf [sic], and every time it really annoys me. Surfing is my dream, and a dream is a powerful thing.

It's hard for me to decide what is more important to me – my principals or my dreams. [...] And when I think of it all, all the *Halacha* and the laws and commandments, in all of these the woman has to hide herself and give up what she wants (except for *Shmirat Negiaa*, which a man also needs to do this). It's a bit annoying that we need to do all of this so that the boys don't sin. It feels like that instead of the Torah and *Halacha* giving tools for men to handle their lust, they say to the woman 'hide yourself, give up your dreams, don't do anything that you like because it might be distracting for a man.' And sometimes I ask myself what for? It's not fair that they can surf and I can't." (Sherlow, 2015)

For this asker, *Shemirat Negiaa* and other rules related to separating the sexes and to modesty are a personal burden that makes her life goals seem impossible. This girl is negotiating practices of modesty and gender separation by describing how these rules get in the way of her personal ambitions and hobbies. Although she is not completely dismissing *Halacha*, she is clearly seeking reasons for her sacrifice or/and for a more egalitarian approach. She is using her personal story to question and negotiate the gender and sexual norms. Her question is, to some extent, very radical – it challenges the fundamental reasons for modesty and keeping the *Halacha*, or as she puts it, "I ask



myself what for? It's not fair..." thus claiming that *Halacha* is "not fair" and that it is hard for her to accept or understand the reasons for keeping it.

Other users asking about the delicate issues of masturbation or *Shmirat Negiaa* also share their personal stories. However, unlike the above asker, who presents the *Halachic* rulings as getting in the way of her dreams, many of the users present their own inability to keep the *Halachic* ruling as a struggle, problem, or "sin." By doing so, these users more clearly accept the traditional norms because they agree to the *Halachic* rulings. For example: "My wife and I are married for about a year and a half... My wife is in the beginning of her first pregnancy and the doctors forbade us from having intercourse... My question is: Is there a prohibition on male masturbation during this time?" (Straus, 2014) Again, without revealing his identity, the person asking reveals a lot about his life. It seems that one way in which the askers make their questions legitimate, necessary, and worthy of being asked is by sharing the specifics of their cases – personal demotivation or mental pain. Perhaps they are even trying to justify their actions due to their unique personal situation. That is, the askers are not necessarily trying to make claims to an overarching change in *Halachic* rulings, but to procure a pass for their particular case. By framing the topic as personal and not communal, they can perhaps be allowed change in their lives without claiming to disrupt the system or to change the discourse. In their attempts to not change the existing system, some users already frame their actions as sins. They write to the rabbis to ask forgiveness or tips for not sinning. For example:

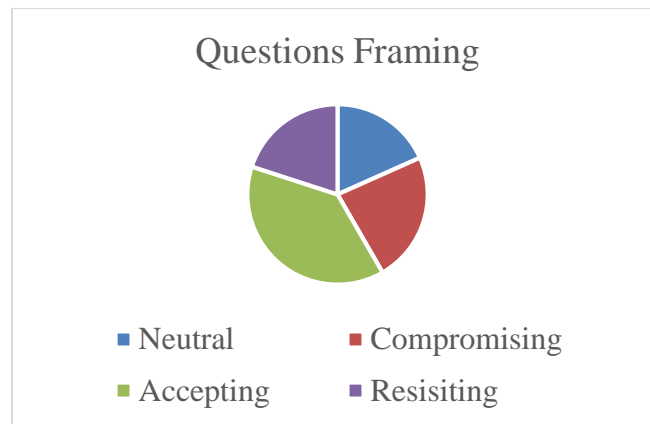
Masturbation is a thing I didn't care much about but I sinned in this quite a bit! And although my will [not to sin] the Yetzer [evil inclination, evil

desire] makes me sin again and again! :( I don't want this at all! I'm not like everyone that do so for fun (half a class + masturbate) and this is a religious school! I am so sad that I kill a child! (spilled the seed) And I beg that God will forgive me -- what should I do so that the Yetzer will leave me and God will forgive me? Fast? Give charity? :( (Eliyahu, 2013)

Here the user is not negotiating the severity of his actions. In fact, he might even take a more severe approach to/interpretation of his actions than the rabbi (who tells him he is already on the right path and he need not feel so sad). This framing of masturbation/not keeping *Shmirat Negiaa* as an unquestionable sin can be considered a type of self-regulation, in which the actual act of posting a digital question serves perhaps as a confession, a way to satisfy your own goals/expectations of yourself, a call for help, and even a way to enforce traditional norms, acting as a type of passive regulator of yourself and others – like a panopticon (Tsuria, 2016).

The questions asked were slightly different in style between the websites, mainly in the way the questions were asked. In this sample, questions from Kipa.co.il and Askmoses.com included mostly personal questions, while questions from Aish.com included also more general and theological questions. Out of n=10 questions from Aish.com, four were more theological – for example, asking “Could you please give me a Jewish definition of what it means to be a ‘man?’” (Aish, 2017d). That being said, most of the questions on Aish.com were still personal, such as, “My boyfriend just got a new job and will be moving to my city. He says that it’s time we start living together. [...] But I’m wondering if there is a downside to this as well?” (Aish, 2017c) Generally, the personal tone/question style was dominant throughout the sample, regardless of the website.

Figure 10. Distribution of negotiating frames in questions.



The discursive strategy of framing personal problems as sins was found in examples from Kipa.co.il and Askmoses.com, but not in any of the questions from Aish.com. For example, a user on Askmoses.com asks “How do I stop looking at porn?” (Askmoses, 2017b), thus already framing pornography consumption as problematic and illicit. Another difference between the websites is that Kipa’s users tend to be interested in *Halachic* rulings, while users asking questions on Aish.com and Askmoses.com were interested in general “Jewish thinking.” That being said, some users on Aish.com and Askmoses.com were aware of *Halacha* and *Halachic* concepts, such as an example from Aish.com in which a user asks about women singing in public and mentioning *Kol Isha* (Aish, 2017e), or a user chatting on Askmoses.com citing the *Halachic* text of *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (Resnick, n.d.). All and all, the similarities between the questions posted to these three websites, specifically relative to the way users ask questions (the discursive strategies), are more apparent than differences in asking style.

Overall, the questions were all coded for their level of accepting or resisting religious sexual norms based on assessing the style and tone of the questions users asked. For example, an “accepting” question includes phrases like “I know this is wrong” – thus asserting a *Halachic* stance as correct. A “compromising” question includes phrases like “while I know this is wrong, maybe...” – thus negotiating communal norms and personal stories/practices. A neutral question would be something like “what is the source for this practice?” or “what is the Jewish attitude toward this?” – these type of questions do not explicitly take a stance against or for any certain practice. Lastly, a resisting question would include explicit statements against a practice, like “I do not think we should follow this law” – thus overtly opposing a *Halachic* stance.

**Table 2: Attitudes Inherent in Questions in Three Orthodox Jewish Q&A Websites**

|                     | <b>Kipa</b> | <b>Aish</b> | <b>Askmoses</b> | <b>All three<br/>websites</b> |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Neutral</b>      | 4           | 2           | 5               | 11                            |
| <b>Compromising</b> | 6           | 4           | 4               | 14                            |
| <b>Accepting</b>    | 14          | 2           | 7               | 23                            |
| <b>Resisting</b>    | 4           | 2           | 6               | 12                            |
| <b>TOTAL</b>        | 28          | 10          | 22              | 60                            |

Out of  $n=60$  questions, the negotiation of practices at the level of the question ranges from resisting ( $n=12$ ), to compromising norms to some degree ( $n=14$ ), to neutral ( $n=11$ ), to supporting the practice already at the level of the question ( $n=23$ ). As can be seen from Table 1, Kipa.co.il had the highest number of questions accepting the sexual norm ( $n=14$ ), while Askmoses.com had the highest number of questions resisting the norm ( $n=6$ ).

Aside from the attitudes toward the *Halachic* rulings implied in the questions, two discursive strategies can be pointed out by analyzing the questions. The first is the use of personal story/tone. As seen in the examples above, users voice their concerns through their individual stories and struggles, thus avoiding attacking the overall *Halachic* system by focusing on an individual case. The second discursive strategy can be noted when users frame their actions as sinful or wrong, thus already accepting the strict religious interpretation and sexual norms. Together, these two strategies are used to negotiate Orthodox sexual practices in online Q&A websites at the level of the questions. The next subsection examines the ways rabbis answered these questions and what type of discursive strategies they implemented.

*Answers.* When it comes to the answers given by rabbis, the negotiation of the religious norms concerning masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa* is far less complicated. By in large, all of the rabbis answering (more than  $n=24$  different rabbis), are of the opinion that masturbation is always forbidden, and *Shmirat Negiaa* should be kept, except for within close family (you can hug your siblings and parents). However, the reasoning for their answers and the verbal enforcement of a prohibition varies amongst the rabbis'

responses. For example, answering the question mentioned before about surfing, gender segregation, and *Shmirat Negiaa*, Rabbi Sherlow provides the following answer:

I understand well what you describe in your letter. You do not need to apologize for it. Quite the opposite! [...] What is holiness? Holiness in its essence is about taking a step back, for the great abundance that life gives us, in order to raise up. When Rashi explains the verse ‘You shall be Holy’ he reads it as ‘You shall separate yourselves from sexual immorality and from sin.’ This is the essence of holiness: the godly commandment to raise up in holiness and by answering this call we gain living in the light of the godly matter. For this reason we separate from any physical touch between the sexes that is not in the frame of Family Purity. It’s not because we are afraid there will not be attraction later, or that we don’t want a partner that has been around. These are explanations in the sideline, but this is not the heart of the matter. The essence is moving toward holiness and purity.

Therefore, this is not a confrontation between [personal] dreams and *Halacha*, and *Halacha* is not against the dream, but these are two different dreams – a dream of a life of holiness and purity, and a dream of surfing etc. The best way is to achieve both, but if it is impossible – the decision is definite, to fulfill the dream of holiness and modesty, which is more precious to us. (Sherlow, 2015)

In this answer Sherlow provides a theological, spiritual explanation. He starts by acknowledging the writer’s perspective and praising her for asking (“you don’t need to apologize”). He then does not detail the *Halachic* prohibitions, but instead provides a positive aspiration – holiness. By doing so he provides some room for conversation and discussion. Although he is quite clear about the need to keep modest, the theological approach allows the reader to debate with him/her self – what does holiness mean, indeed? This style of answering might mask legality/rules (in this case, the *Halachic* ruling to keep modest and separate between the sexes) with theology/thoughts (in the case above, the desire to be “holy”), thus making the regulation of the rules into a supposedly well-thought out personal decision. Other rabbis take a more direct strategy.

Rabbi Dani Argaman, for example, when asked “why do we keep *Shmirat Negiaa*,” answers:

Because God wants it and so he said. [Provides sources] Touch has a powerful force to unite, and this force should be used when it’s allowed and not used when it is not allowed, after the wedding you need this touch it connects and builds. By the way, if you use this force before the wedding it loses its power and magic. (Argaman, 2015)

Although Rabbi Argaman does supply sources, his answer is short and shorthand, straightforward and explicit. This answer leaves very little room for debate. Other rabbis in Kipa, Aish, and in Askmoses answer in this style, but usually this shorthand answer comes as a reply to a short, non-personal question. On Askmoses.com, many of the Q&A are actually chats between users and the rabbi/leader. These chats tend to be long, personal, and detailed. The answers to direct questions, on the other hand, tend to be short. On Kipa.co.il, on the other hand, the length of the answer seems to be a matter of a rabbi’s personal style. All in all, the dominant style of answering throughout the websites tends to be long and detailed, to varying degrees.

Answer style could include how detailed the answer is, how long, if it uses *Halachic* or other sources, metaphors, or direct commandments. Generally, two types of discursive styles can be pointed out: while some rabbis advise the person to “make their own decision,” others more explicitly reinforce the rules. Those who explicitly reinforce the rules tend to do so using religious sources or, as pointed out earlier, a monosemic and simplistic approach to religion (“God wants it”). For example, as discussed above, Rabbi Argaman’s answer to why one should not touch the other sex is “Because God wants it and so he said,” thus neglecting to mention the fact the *Shmirat Negiaa* is not explicitly mentioned in the bible, and also overlooking the complicity of *Halachic*

debate on this issue. Those who wish to enforce the religious rules regarding sexuality more implicitly, to convince the users to regulate themselves, use various tactics to achieve this goal, like attaching spiritual meaning (“holiness”), or using “common-sense.” Mrs. Shafer, for example, in her chats with users on the Askmoses.com website, tries to convince the users to follow *Halacha* by using metaphors or common sense arguments. For example, when asked about the prohibition against premarital sex she leads the users into a thought experiment of the type of “would you take a ring without paying?” and has them conclude that you need to commit (in this example, money for goods; in the case of premarital sex, a wedding contract for intimacy). She does not use theological reasoning or *Halachic* textual sources; instead she creates a (supposedly) logical, common-sense argument in the line of “we all know” or “no one would do that.” Another rabbi uses generally-acceptable modern secular terms, such as sexual harassment, to speak about the virtue of *Shmirat Negiaa*: “...when you touch with many parts of the body, and for a long time it is hard to define it as ‘not a touch of affection’ [...] even a secular girl might see it as sexual harassment! So how can we say it is not of affection” (Feigelin, 2010). Others use secular arguments, such as medical and psychological reasons for practicing modesty – for example, while answering a question about why women cannot sing in front of men, one rabbi answers:

...Psychologists attribute man’s stronger sexual drive to many factors. The nature of their hormones, the constitution of their psychological disposition and their physical makeup are but a few of the explanations given. Whatever the case may be, the fact that men are generally more aggressively driven after their sexual impulse than women, is an uncontested fact no matter how you approach it. Men and women have different criteria for sexual arousal. Hearing a woman sing is sexually arousing for a man... (Aish, 2017e)



As can be seen from these examples, the style of the answers varies, suggesting different strategies of authority and norms enforcement. The variation in style is related to the personality of the rabbi, the nature of the question, or the objectives of the website. As previously mentioned, Aish's and Chabad's objective is reaching unaffiliated Jews, and so the answers found on these websites tends to use more secular reasoning. For example, one Askmoses.com rabbi argues that pre-marital sex is similar to fatty foods and drugs: we only think they make us happy, but we all know these things are bad for your body (Askmoses, 2017c). Similarly, many of the rabbis answering use a variety of secular or modern reasoning, thus employing a type of common-sense discursive strategy. That being said, some of the rabbis answering, even on these missionizing websites of Chabad and Aish, use clear religious language, arguing that something is right or wrong only because the *Torah* says so. For example, answering the question "What's wrong with pre-marital sex?" Askmoses.com rabbi Naftali Silberberg says: "The Torah commands us to marry before we engage in sexual relations. [...] Marriage means inviting G-d into the relationship. Pre-marital sex reduces a holy act into a base, animalistic desire" (Silberberg, n.d.). In comparison, most rabbis answering on Kipa.co.il use some kind of religious sources (theological, *Halachic*, or modern religious). Since Kipa is a more communal-focused website, as discussed in the method section, rabbis answering on Kipa might be more concerned about how their answers are read within the community and how their answers might be influencing *Halachic* discourse. Regardless of style, one of the consistent similarities between rabbis' answers throughout the websites is that they all present a strict approach towards sexuality.

Furthermore, the answers the rabbis give become fossilized and serve as online sources for understanding the (ideal?) norms of gender and sexual behavior.

*Comments.* The comments section is the last element in the Q&A webpage in which practices are negotiated. Both Askmoses and Kipa allow comments, as well as sharing on social networking sites. Since Aish does not have a comment section, it is not discussed in the following pages. The content of the comments is important to analyze in order to understand how negotiation of sexuality and gender takes place in various styles and layers of online discourse. Out of the n=60 Q&A (n=50 if Aish is not included) selected for this sample, n=23 have at least one comment, and some Q&A have as many as n=14 comments, totaling in n=81 comments. Some of the comments have rabbis reacting to them, but those were not counted as additional comments. Most of the comments are relatively short, one to two lines, but some are as long as a paragraph. Comments can be roughly divided into three categories: adding questions, disagreeing, or supporting/thanking. Out of the n=81 comments, n=46 are supportive, for example: “Great Response! One can always be assured of a compassionate, thoughtful, sequential response from Mrs. Shaffer! [...]” or “Just wonderful! Thank you very much for being so patient...” (both comments from Askmoses, 2016d). The supportive comments themselves can be further divided. Some are simply thanking the rabbi, some add sources or reasons, and some even call out other users who are not supportive of the rabbi’s position. The following example, although long, shows the variety of comments, and exemplifies the supportive, negotiating, and adding questions types of comments. The comments in the example provided below follow a question regarding female

masturbation. The question details nine different inquiries about female masturbation, including is it common, is it bad, what are the physical results, is it a sin, should she tell her boyfriend, etc. The asker is clearly embarrassed and apologetic for asking such a taboo question. She says: “I apologize in advance for this question [...] I could not ask it in the past out of shame [...] thank you for letting me ask this here!” and at the end of her questions she repeats “thank you and well done” and apologizes. (Eliyahu, 2004). The rabbi answering (Uziel Eliyhu) begins by providing online sources (perhaps to show that others have asked this as well?) and then adds on to them that this is a big issue nowadays, and that while it is not *Halachically* forbidden “it is clearly a bad phenomenon and a surrender to your lust [or: inclination, in Hebrew: *Yezzer*, יֵצֶר]” (Eliyahu, 2004). The rabbi goes on to supply some mystical and spiritual reasons for avoiding masturbation, and how some surrendering to lust can lead to bigger sins (like adultery). He concludes by saying that ‘The *Torah* sees a high value in controlling your lust [inclination] [...] [but do] not to oppress it or to crush it...’ (Eliyahu, 2004). After this answer, there are n=16 comments reacting to this Q&A, from as early as 2004 to February 2016. The following excerpt provides a few of these comments, to showcase the varying attitudes reflected in the comment section: (bolded text signifies titles given by users):

Comment 1 [12/26/2004]: **Reinforcement**. This is so strengthening and true all the things the rabbi says! Thank you so much! A huge Yeser Koech [well done]!

Comment 2 [1/9/2005]: **Problem with trying to repent**. But what if it is really very hard to quit it what do you do then, is it not allowed for example just once a week? If someone has an answer I would like to receive

Comment 4 [7/21/2005]: **Wow thank you so much.** For a long time I'm feeling bad about myself [doing it], I've experienced this phenomenon and didn't know what was the Torah ruling on it. I didn't dare tell someone or ask since I didn't know there were more like me! Thank you so much!!! You helped me a lot...

Comment 5 [6/5/2006]: **No way?? [מה פתאום].** I've discovered this by accident at a young age and for year my conscience was killing me. I tormented myself long and hard to stop and I almost succeeded. I thought to myself, when I get married this will stop by itself. Today I am married and I am so not sorry for my experience with this because this is how I've learned what feels good for me and could reach pleasure also with my partner I hear about married women that do not enjoy [intercourse] and don't know how to have fun with their husbands. And both sides are then frustrated. I'm not saying you must but if you have this experience it is for sure not bad. I think for girls it comes from a different place then for boys.

**Rabbi's response:** From a Jewish point of view this is not good because then a person is only concentrated on himself. It's not good for the individual and not good for the relationship and not for his soul.

Comment 6 [11/10/2006]: **Are you not ashamed?** Who gave the permission to permit??? Imagine that I will permit [wearing] pants and she will permit something else and the Torah will become a breached thing God Forbid! So maybe there is no explicit prohibition although it does say "As the way of the Egyptians you shall not do" [often attributed to the prohibition against lesbianism and female masturbation] and you indeed know very well in [your] mind!!! That God does not want you to do this because it is unholy! It's surrendering to your sexual needs! And God did not create us for that.. I am sure you husband would not react as positively as you do!!

Comment 7 [5/7/2009]: **You can notice.** I actually understand what the married woman is saying, there is some truth in it. And she wasn't talking about permitting because there isn't a halachic ban here. She pointed at the advantages as they are expressed in a pure marriage relationship. Try to understand a bit of subtext – in her answer and, of course, in the rabbi's answer.

Comment 8 [10/24/2010]: **What is preferred?!** First of all it is important for me to mention that I am so happy that there is someone to talk about this with because obviously this is a topic that you can't discuss openly so a great thank you for the rabbi and I'm sorry we include you in this undignified discussion [...]

Comment 10 [2/1/2012]: **You are kind of over doing it with these questions.** I think the rabbi answer enough of you questions [...] if you need more help maybe you should go to therapy or a gynecologist [...]

Comment 11 [6/22/2014]: **Number 10 – I disagree.** A psychiatrist or gynecologist will approach this from a medical perspective. According to them there is no problem with masturbation, and therefore they are not the right people to answer this. The only way to stop this habit is through spiritual reinforcement! That is why addressing the rabbi is the best channel for a religious girl. [...] (Eliyahu, 2004)

Analyzing these comments points to several strategies for the negotiation of practice.

Out of the total  $n=16$  comments to this Q&A,  $n=12$  either support the rabbi's answer completely (like comments 1 and 4), or ask further questions that indicate support (like comments 2 and 8). They seem to support both the need to ask (e.g., thank the publishing of the Q&A in comment 4, or asserting in comment 11 that "addressing the rabbi is the best channel for a religious girl"), and the need to accept the rabbi's response. Furthermore, it is clear that the Q&A allow an avenue for speaking about taboo topics. The users are explicit about how thankful they are to be able to talk about it with someone: "all it is important for me to mention that I am so happy that there is someone to talk about this with because obviously this is a topic that you can't discuss openly" (comment 8). Here, anonymity and direct access to a rabbi allow users to explore and discuss sexual practices they could not discuss elsewhere. Alcoff and Gray (1993) argued that the first step in liberation is the ability to discuss, to create a discourse. However, as discussed in the theory and method chapters of this dissertation, the discourse is itself a site of struggle, of knowledge construction and power negotiation. In the case of this discourse, we see how many of the users employ their power to support a strict practice of banning masturbation. While quite a few of the

comments seem to suggest that female masturbation is a widespread practice (comments 2, 3,4,5,7, 9, and 15), many of them frame it as a problem or struggle (comments 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 15). In this way, these users affirm the strict religious view of this sexual practice as forbidden.

Furthermore, emphasizing the taboo nature of these issues becomes itself a discursive strategy. While a few users celebrate the opportunity to ask and discuss this taboo issue, both in asking questions and in the comment section, it seems some of the users feel there is a limit to how and what you should ask, even anonymously. Comments 8 and 10 in the above example are especially telling, as both explicitly express asking questions about these topics as awkward: “You are kind of over doing it with these questions” (comment 10) and “a great thank you for the rabbi and I’m sorry we include you in this undignified discussion” (comment 8). The user who wrote comment 8 seems to recognize both the need to ask these questions by thanking the rabbi, and the uneasy nature of these questions, for which she apologizes. The user who wrote comment 10, however, is more militant in her opinion that these questions should not be asked, or at least not “publicly” of a male rabbi. Comment 11 is then written in counterpoint, supporting the notion that these questions should be asked, and answered by rabbis, otherwise women will continue to act in a “wrong way” (masturbate), since “The only way to stop this habit is through spiritual reinforcement” (comment 11). It seems most of the users are not challenging the notion that female masturbation is wrong, but are rather seeking to find ways to stop it. Only two out of the eleven users are resisting this norm to some degree, by offering ways in which masturbation can be

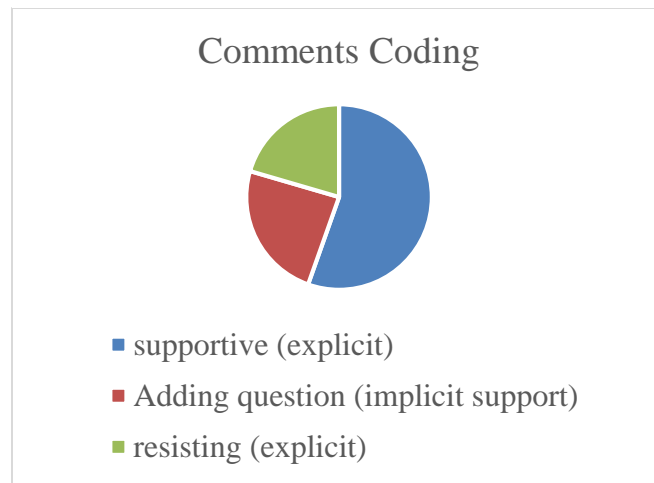
thought of in positive religious terminology – for example, preventing fractures within marriages: “Today I am **married** and I am so not sorry... I hear about married women that do not enjoy [intercourse]... And both sides are then **frustrated**” (comment 5, my emphasis) and “She pointed at the advantages as they are expressed in **a pure marriage relationship**. Try to understand a bit of subtext – in her answer and, of course, in the rabbi’s answer” (comment 7, my emphasis). These women are allowing the sexual practice of female masturbation by placing it within the correct religious values – in keeping marriage intact, functioning, and happy. This is a resistance discursive strategy that does not reject the Jewish religious worldview, but instead uses some values (like the sanctity of marriage) to make sexual norms more flexible and less strict. The second user (comment 7) even goes so far as to indicate that the rabbi’s subtext also supports a flexible attitude toward female masturbation. While this is an interesting negotiation that would probably not be possible outside the digital discourse/comment section (or at least would not be made public), most of the comments indicate not a negotiation of the practice, but rather a construction of the practice as forbidden and the discussion of the topic as challenging, thus supporting traditional or even fundamental (strict) attitudes towards masturbation.

Comparing the comment sections of Kipa.co.il and Askmoses.com (since Aish.com does not allow for comments) reveals some interesting differences between the Q&A in these sites. Specifically, while in both websites most comments are supportive of the rabbi’s position in their response (n=21 for Askmoses.com and n=25 for Kipa.co.il), Kipa.co.il has many more comments speaking against the rabbis’ answer

(n=15) by critiquing it, and arguing that the rabbis are too strict or incorrect, as seen in the example above. In fact, out of the entire comment sample (n=32) from Askmoses.com only two comments resist the rabbis' answers, as they state, "awful logic on pre-marital sex..." (Silberberg, n.d.) and "I'm a bit confused. [...] does this mean Jews should not use contraception and only have sex when they want to have children? Sounds more like Catholisism [sic] to me. Please help me understand befeore [sic] I stop having sex for the rest of my life..." (Hecht, n.d.). Aside from these two comments, almost all of the comments on Askmoses.com seem to strengthen the rabbinical position, by either explicitly thanking the rabbi answering or supplying further support to the rabbi's argument/answer. Perhaps the more argumentative commenting behaviors on Kipa.co.il, are a result of the website trying to facilitate a communal discourse, in which users feel they have more at stake, since it is their specific community forming its norms. In comparison, Askmoses.com operates in accordance with Chabad's worldview (discussed in the methods chapter) to missionize and promote Judaism, and as a result, does not necessarily try to create a specific denominational communal space.



Figure 11. Distribution of comments negotiation.



The entire comment sample was coded as either explicitly supportive of a strict approach (n=46); asking further questions, which tended to implicitly support the rabbis/strict approach (n=20); or explicitly resisting the rabbi's answer (n=17). In the above example, we see comments like 1 and 4 being supportive and thanking the rabbi, and comments like 2 asking further questions about masturbation. The commenters who are explicitly against the rabbis' answers tend to prefer a more lenient approach to sexual behaviors, as in comments 5 and 7 in the above example. In this example, the "against" comment is disregarded by the rabbi and another user, who blames the previous user for having no shame and reminding her she has no legal authority: "Who gave [you] the permission to permit???" (Eliyahu, 2004). As can be seen from these results (see Figure 11), while the comment sections enable users to resist, this discursive space was mostly used by people who empowered the rabbis and the religious approach the rabbis promoted. A case can be made that these comments exemplify a form of Foucauldian

governmentality. In contrast to a strict top-down show of force, where the Rabbi simply chastises women respondents for their views or responses, the discourse in these comments reveal a tendency of users to deploy strategies of peer-regulation towards one another. The *Halacha* is indeed enforced by the rabbi in his answer, but this force goes beyond the mere rhetorical and doctrinal affirmation exercised by the commenters. Users direct and regulate each other in order to maintain a religious structures of power similar to what is found in their offline communities, between the rabbi and the people. Yet the internet platform also allows them take on new expressions of personal authority simultaneously, as they take on the role and indemnity of being guardians of tradition. As a result, the comment section can be seen as been co-opted by forces of peer-regulation. This constitutes a secondary normalizing layer within the discourse, as opposed to just reinforcing structural or traditional resistance.

In summary, the negotiation of practices as analyzed in these Q&A have a few common elements (i.e., question, answer, comments). By offering users the ability to ask questions about explicit sexual topics, I argue, these websites allow a discourse to take place on taboo matters and practices in ways that are not always possible offline. This allows users to voice their concerns, disagreements, and hardships regarding traditional religious sexual norms and gender behaviors. The rabbis' answers, most of the time, are non-negotiable, that is, they take a strict approach. However, this analysis points to a variety of styles of support for these practices can be found in the rabbis' answers. While some stick to *Halachic* rulings, others offer spiritual or common-sense arguments. The comment section, where one could expect the most explicit push-back and negotiation, is

largely in support of the rabbis' position and answers. The ability to participate in the discourse offered by digital media, is exercised, but users utilize this participatory aspect of the online discourse not in order to resist the established practices, but rather to in order to support them.

## **Summary**

Analyzing the Discourse of Practice in online Q&A highlights the construction and negotiation in this Orthodox digital discourse and the strategies used to promote or resist a strict approach to the sexual norms. This chapter examined n=60 Q&A from three websites: Aish.com, Askemoses.com (of Chabad.org), and Kipa.co.il. For simplification purposes, the Q&A selected all dealt with two specific religious sexual norms: masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa* (abstaining from touch the other sex). Using the tri-layered critical discourse model, three elements of the discourse were examined throughout this chapter: the technological affordances, the religious cultural context, and the discursive strategies. These three layers together show how, generally speaking, online Jewish Orthodox Q&A enable a participatory discourse that tends to strengthen traditional religious patriarchal gender and sexual norms through a monosemic approach to religion, and reinforce and regulate discursive strategies. These findings are further detailed in the next few pages.

First, examining the technological affordances highlights how they create a digital discourse with varying degrees of interactivity, depending on the website: Chabad

being the most interactive, Kipa very interactive, and Aish the least interactive (not allowing for comments). All the websites allow sharing of the Q&A on social media sites, provide access to their archives, and depend on users asking questions. Thus, it can be argued that while it is the rabbis who operate as the authority in this discourse by supplying the answers, the users contribute in a grassroots fashion, by raising the topic, asking questions that were not so openly discussed before the digital discourse (Pitkowsky, 2011). Thus, the “digital” aspect of this Orthodox digital discourse seems to create a discourse that is somewhat participatory, interactive, and shared.

Second, the analysis of religious cultural context in this discourse reveals a tendency to minimize using *Halachic* sources (or use them in distinct ways), to use some online/modern sources, and to present religious worldview as monosemic. These findings support previous research on online *Responsa* (Gottesman, 2009; Steinitz, 2011). While all websites exemplify this, it should be noted that Aish rabbis’ use the most *Halachic* sources in the responses throughout the sample. This higher use of religious sources coupled with the inability to comment frames Aish as the most traditionally authoritative website – a website in which the rabbi’s answer is supported by ***Halachic teaching***, and cannot be explicitly disputed through comments (since users cannot comment, they cannot resist within the website’s boundaries), thus upholding the rabbis’ authority. However, even on Aish the way religious sources are used points to a strict and literal interpretation of Judaism. These findings highlight the specific way the “Orthodox” aspect of the Orthodox digital discourse plays out in the discourse on sexuality: that is, in this discourse, religious *Halachic* language and ruling, which are

usually framed as multifaceted and negotiable (Dosick, 2010), are presented as monosemic and unchanging. The firm stance taken in these texts is supported by a presentation of the religion as rigid and static.

When it comes to the Q&A material, a few discursive strategies can be pointed out. First, the users asking questions tend to use their personal stories, thus allowing for a negotiation of the “static” religion through individual struggles. A second discursive strategy is to frame one’s struggles as sins, thus already self-regulating and assuming a negative or strict approach towards sexuality. The rabbis answering also employ several different discursive strategies, which can roughly be divided into two: either external regulation (the rabbi argues that you need to respond in a certain way because God says so) or internal regulation (you want to do so). The rabbis promoting external regulation tend to use explicit enforcement – to refer to religious reasons or sources (such as God or the *Torah*) as the cause and explanation for Jewish sexual norms. The rabbis promoting internal regulation tend to use a softer approach, combining theological, spiritual, scientific, therapeutic, or common-sense arguments. In their answers, they sometimes recognize or emphasize with the askers’ pain or viewpoint, but try to steer them in the “right” direction. Thus, these discursive strategies seem to allow for a personal choice, but are in fact still representing and constructing “right” and “wrong” sexual norms. Lastly, users in the comment section also employ various tactics to resist or empower strict religious sexual norms. Users who are trying to resist might do so explicitly, but some do so by contrasting sexual prohibitions with other, more important religious values (such as the case of users arguing that maintaining marriages is more important

than prohibiting female masturbation). However, user resistance to the rabbis' answers is minimal compared to users accepting rabbinical attitudes and acting as peer-regulators (only n=17 comments out of n=81 were resisting). For example, in the case of the example given earlier in this chapter, when a user comments encouraging female masturbation (Eliyahu, 2004, comment #5), other users punitively "call her out," correct her behavior, and establish the rabbis' position. That is, the more common discursive strategies found in the comment section are to both thank and strengthen the rabbi's position, or to act as peer-regulators and correct other users.

In summary, the analysis of Orthodox online Q&A conducted in this chapter reveals that the main notion presented in this discourse, from rabbis, askers, and commenters, is that of a strict (מחמיר) position when it comes to masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa*. While the technological affordances allow for a participatory discourse, the religious worldview enacted in this discourse is monosemic and narrow. Overall, the position towards sexuality and gender is a traditional and strict one. Various discursive strategies are employed to strengthen this position, such as using the personal voice, framing actions as sins, employing modern or scientific terms, using literal and monosemic religious cultural manifestation, framing *Halachic* rules as spiritual and empowering, resisting by utilizing other religious values, and peer-regulation. The next chapter examines the same three websites – Chabad, Aish, and Kipa – and will highlight similar tendencies and strategies, but while this chapter focused on the negotiation of practices, the next chapter examines the negotiation of meanings.

**CHAPTER V**

**THE DISCOURSE OF MEANING – ANALYZING ONLINE JEWISH  
DISCOURSE ON GENDER AND SEXUAL SENSE MAKING**

While the last chapter dealt with religious/*Halachically* informed sexual practice and how it is negotiated through online discourse, this chapter deals with meaning attributed to gender and sexuality norms in Jewish religious online discourse. Meaning is difficult to separate from practice, because the two are inherently tied. However, this chapter examined the narratives used to explain practices: the meaning attributed to gender and sexual norms. That is, the online discourse analyzed in this chapter examines how people talk about their gender, their relationships, their intimacy, and their gendered identity – what meanings are attributed to these concepts.

Each of the mainstream websites – Chabad, Aish, and Kipa includes articles written especially for these websites. These articles can be thought of as theological and social examinations of current events, religious rituals, and Jewish life in general. They include anything from politics to *Torah* commentary and advice columns. These articles receive attention from the users, who share or “like” this content through social media, as well as participate through the comment section of each article. I argue that through these interactions, a negotiation of communal norms and meanings takes place. For this chapter, I have collected n=48 articles and videos related to gender and sexuality. Four themes were highlighted through the analysis and will serve as the framework for this

chapter (in the same way the topics of masturbation and *Shmirat Negiaa* focused the last chapter). Those themes are: marriage, intimacy, motherhood, and feminism.

I treat the articles from the three websites as representing one Orthodox digital discourse, as the purpose of this dissertation is to highlight the ways gender and sexual norms are constructed and negotiated in a “general”/“mainstream” Orthodox digital discourse. However, I am fully aware that these websites also serve different communities/purposes, so the nuances of each website will be discussed throughout the chapter. That being said, it is the commonalities between the websites, the discourse that can be extracted from all three of them, that is the focus of this investigation. I will be using tri-layered critical discourse analysis to structure the analysis in three layers: first describing the technological affordances and uses, then examining the religious cultural context employed, and lastly emphasizing the discursive strategies used. Through this analysis, I highlight the ways in which the negotiation and construction of gender and sexual meaning takes place in this Orthodox digital discourse.

This chapter explores meaning making which explains the Orthodox Jewish mainstream conception of gender and sexual norms. That is, I highlight how the online discourse makes sense of what it means to be a man/woman, what Jewish intimacy is about, what are the roles of a husband/wife, and how one structures their personal identity in regards to gender and sexuality. The analysis shows how the online discourse in these websites operates as a normalizing discourse, in which traditional gender roles are confirmed and gender inequalities are explained using either religious or neoliberal language. Unlike the previous chapter, here it is not the work of the religious authority or



code of conduct (the *Halacha*) to determine gender and sexual norms and behavior – instead, it is the work of “everyone and no one in particular” (Bartsky, 1988, p. 80) to co-create and reframe what the established gender and sexual norms **mean**.

The rest of the chapter will consist of the analysis of the chosen sample which will highlight the ways meaning is made and the types of meanings gender and sexual norms receive in this Orthodox digital discourse. I first briefly explain the sample rationale, and then provide some context on general Jewish attitudes toward marriage, intimacy, motherhood, and feminist issues. I then go on to provide an analysis of the material. The analysis, like in the previous chapter, will begin by providing the larger context of the technological framework, or affordances. It will then focus on the religious language and terminology. The last part of the analysis will examine the discursive and linguistic choices, which will be further explored in detail the four themes: feminism, marriage, intimacy, and motherhood. Lastly, a summary of the key findings will be presented. While the selection of the sample is further discussed below, it is worth noting here that out of the n=35 authors of the articles sampled, eight are males (authoring total n=10 articles), one is unclear, and n=26 are female (authoring total of n=37 articles). The presence of the female voice is important, I suggest, for the discourse of meaning. I suggest that while men can offer religious interpretations and act as rule makers as rabbis and religious leaders, it is the women who have to make-sense of, explain, and navigate their (inferior) status within the religious system. Based on my analysis provided throughout this chapter, the voice given to these women through the online discourse seems to be a voice that strengthens chauvinistic/traditional gender

perspective, but nonetheless, it is a female voice that is heard and seen, in a religious world dominated by the male perspective.

As mention in the method chapter (Chapter III), the sample for this chapter was collected from general articles and videos from the three websites: Chabad.org, Aish.com, and Kipa.co.il. Overall, n=48 articles and videos were collected and n=1103 comments. I used the websites' search functions to look up tags or key words such as "gender," "sex," "marriage," "intimacy," etc. The sample was conducted by combining both pulled articles using these tag words, and finding articles that were "pushed" in the specialty sections dedicated to women or family issues, as mentioned in Chapter III. From the initial analysis of the material, four issues or themes seem most prominent in this discourse: marriage, intimacy, motherhood, and feminism. These themes are used as a framework, a focused investigation that allows for the extraction of a focused critical analysis. The focused analysis answers the question of how are gender and sex constructed and negotiated in this online Orthodox discourse by providing insight into the use of technology, religious cultural context, and discursive strategies.

The chapter begins by supplying some context on these issues as they are conceptualized in Judaism. Then the analysis will be organized following the tri-layered critical discourse analysis model, starting with the technological affordances as a type of set-up in which the discourse takes place. This will be followed by an examination of the use and negotiation of religious cultural context, and finally by analyzing linguistic choices and discursive strategies.

## **Genealogy of Jewish Gender Norms: Marriage, Intimacy, Motherhood, and Feminism**

This section offers some context on the core issues discussed throughout the chapter – that is, the Jewish Orthodox notions regarding marriage, intimacy, motherhood, and feminism. It is impossible to paint a perfect picture of these issues in such a brief section, since these issues change according to historical, political, geographic, and cultural differences. However, this section will attempt to provide some basic information on Jewish attitudes towards these issues, so the reader is better positioned to engage and assess the analysis in the rest of the chapter.

As noted in the introduction, Judaism, like most religious traditions, has a binary understanding of gender that distinguishes between male/female, man/woman (Cantor, 1995). While the *Talmud* does discuss people who are in between – biologically androgynous – it does so by asking to which gender these people belong, thus maintaining the notion of man/woman (Schleicher, 2011). According to Judith Baskin, while rabbinical Judaism consists of a variety of competing interpretations and opinions regarding gender and sexual norms, what they all share is the strong conviction that women are separate from men, from both a social and legal perspective (1995). Legally and socially in Judaism, women were marginalized and othered even though they played a central role in society, as mothers, educators, and even businesswomen (Baskin, 1995). Put plainly, in Judaism, men are *Halachically* responsible, both for themselves and for their families. They need to participate in communal rituals, such as daily prayers and

holidays, learn *Torah* regularly, and maintain *Halachic* behaviors. Women are less *Halachically* obliged (for example, they do not need to pray or study), but they do need to maintain their bodies and houses kosher. That is, many of the *Halachic* obligations expected of women are related to making sure that men's environments are religiously correct. As argued by Rachel Biale, women's *Halachic* obligations are set to maintain their domestic role (Biale, 1984). That being said, women are obliged to participate in some religious rituals and holidays: they need to say an evening prayer (*Shema*), listen to the *Shofar* in Jewish New Year, participate in the *Seder* during Passover, etc. (Dosick, 2010).

Most centrally, women in Judaism are meant to be mothers and wives (Baskin, 1995). Marriage in Judaism is an important and happy occasion in one's life, and to this day, Orthodox women and men marry relatively young (younger than 24 years old) and have fewer divorces, according to a 2013 Pew research (Cooperman et al., 2013). The traditional concept of marriage is that the man buys the woman from her family. The original *Halachic* source describing marriage reads, "A woman is acquired in three ways, and she acquires herself [i.e., divorce] in two ways. She is acquired through money, document, and sexual intercourse [...] she acquires herself through a *Get* [divorce document] and through her husband's death" (*Kiddushin*, 2a). As can be seen from this text, marriage is considered a purchasing contract, like other economic contracts. However, even in ancient Judaism women had some rights in this contract, such as divorce, and also the right to expect her husband to feed her, dress her, and provide safety to her. Furthermore, in the case of the husband's death or divorce, she is

owed a certain sum of money to help her maintain a quality of life. These details are finalized in a wedding document known as a *ketuva*, which, while it used to be strictly a legal document, has become in modern days an artistic souvenir from one's wedding, a souvenir many couples frame and display in their houses (see figure 12). To this day, many Orthodox Jewish marriages are arranged marriages, with a varying degree of agency on the part of the future wife and groom. For an example, in the National-Religious community, it is customary for friends, friends of family, or a matchmaker (*Shedchanit*) to set a date between two young people. However, once the date is set, it is completely up to the couple to decide if they wish to continue dating or not. That is, while the date might be set for them, the young couple have total agency. In more strictly religious communities, the decision could be already made between two families, but the couple will still go on a date or two, and can still veto the arrangement (Rockman, 1994).

Figure 12. Example of a Ketuva.



Before the wedding day, women and men receive rabbinical council about marriage and intimacy. Usually, men meet with male rabbis who will explain to them about family purity, the religious approach to intimacy, and how to treat their future wives. Women will meet with a female – it could be the rabbi’s wife, or the more official “bridal guide” (*Mederichat Calot*) – who will instruct the woman about how to keep family purity, the religious approach to intimacy, and what is expected from her as a wife and mother. Since in many Orthodox communities, men and women have less social interaction, the purpose of these meetings is to prepare them to live with the other sex, and specifically, to discuss intimacy and family purity.

Intimacy between a husband and a wife in Judaism is considered very important and positive, and it is one of the duties a husband owes his wife. To some extent, even female sexuality is recognized. For example, there is a *Talmudic* saying that if the man reaches orgasm first the child will be a girl, and if the female reaches orgasm first the child will be a boy (Talmud Bavli, *Berachot*, 60a) – meaning the rabbis of the *Talmud* recognized female sexuality and even to some degree encouraged it. However, by and large, sexuality and intimacy are conceptualized from a male perspective with little to no attention paid to female needs and pleasures. For example, during the wedding night, the man and woman must consummate their marriage through penetration, which, as will be seen in the analysis below, can be traumatic for many young women who have never touched a man before that night. Furthermore, there are many rabbis and *Halachic* rulings that minimize intimacy to penetration, and a famous *Halachic* debate between the Maimonides and rabbi Yosef Karo (author of the important *Halachic* book *Shulchan*

*Aruch*) concerning whether it is allowed to “kiss or touch that place [i.e. the vulva]” (Mainmondies allows and Karo forbids).

Sexuality and intimacy also have to do with family purity (*Niddah*) and with modesty (*Tzaniut*) – that is, in the ways the female and male bodies are conceptualized. Modesty is important for both men and women, married or single. However, modesty rules concerning women are far more detailed and strict than those for men, and married women have an additional *Halachic* ruling to cover their hair as well as their body. The issue of modesty concerns three aspects: dress, relationship with the opposite sex (touch), and overall behavior. For example, women are not allowed to sing in front of men. While makeup is not *Halachically* forbidden, putting on visible makeup is considered immodest. Men and women cannot hug, touch, or shake hands with the other sex (as discussed in detail in the previous chapter). Overall, both men and women should not act or dress in a way that draws attention to their bodies. Specifically for women, they should wear clothes that hide their arms, legs, and cleavage; skirts and not pants; clothes that are not see-through or tight. In other words, they need to dress in a way that abstracts their body.

Family purity rules concern a woman’s menstruation and giving birth. According to the bible, any bleeding (or semen, for that matter) from one’s reproductive body parts makes one unholy. In order to become pure again (and as a result be allowed to touch and attend temple worship) they need to wash in a ritual bath. In biblical and temple times, the ritual baths were used to purify people from a variety of things: touching dead bodies, spilling seed, some skin diseases, and menstrual blood. All of these necessitate

ritual cleaning (Dosick, 1995). Once the temple was destroyed, only menstrual and birth blood still necessitated ritual cleaning; in some, more pious Orthodox communities, spilling seed also demands ritual cleaning. During a wife's menstruation, and for seven "clean" days thereafter, she and her husband cannot touch. Once she goes to the ritual bath she is "pure" and intimacy is restored. By and large, as discussed in the introduction, while intimacy is a positive aspect of Jewish life, the main purpose of intimacy is reproduction.

Motherhood is also a very important part of a Jewish woman's life. Most Orthodox women become mothers at a relatively young age and have large families (Cooperman et al., 2013). This is both a result of the general prohibition against the use of contraception (although today some rabbis in some cases allow birth control pills) and of the ongoing communal and social drive toward motherhood, the constant expectation in Jewish and Israeli society to bear children (Berkovitch, 1997). As mentioned in the introduction, Judaism is a matrilineal religion/ethnicity, and as such, mothers play an important part in the Jewish family and peoplehood. After the Holocaust and especially in Israel, motherhood became a national mission, and many Jewish Orthodox women see it as their goal to help the nation of Israel grow (Berkovitch, 1997). As such, motherhood takes on a prominent role in women's lives, even though from a purely *Halachic* perspective they are not obliged to have children. It is men who are obliged *Halachically* to have children through marriage (and not illegitimately) and to take care of their children: to feed them, find marriage partners for them, and take care of their futures. For example fathers are charged to take special care of their male children – the father



must circumcise his sons, teach them *Torah*, and help train them in an occupation. However, throughout Jewish history, and in some contemporary Orthodox communities, as men spent most of the time out of the house (either working or learning *Torah*), the job of educating young children fell *de facto* on the mothers. Furthermore, mothers are entrusted with educating their daughters with keeping a kosher household and to prepare for married life (Sered, 1988).

In modernity, the traditional values described above were challenged by general secular notions and by the social movement of feminism. To clarify, feminism questions many of the assumptions upon which the gendered lifestyle of Orthodox Jews relies: that women should stay home and be mothers, that their sexual needs can be disregarded and their bodies hidden/controlled, that they can be bought into marriage, and that men and women are inherently different. As a result, Orthodox Judaism and feminism are seen to be in contradiction, and different approaches are taken to deal with this tension. Some Orthodox Jews completely reject feminism and see it a destructive force in Jewish life (as will be shown in the analysis below. Also see Kaufman, 1991). Some Orthodox communities accept feminism in “secular” areas of life, by, for example, allowing women access to general and higher education and expanding women’s professional leadership and choices of occupation, but they reject feminism in the religious areas of life, such as synagogue or *Halachic* rules (Biale, 1984). For people who try to combine both feminism and traditional Judaism, life is full of contradictions (Kaufman, 1991). Some Orthodox Jews try more actively to combine feminism and Orthodoxy in their

daily and religious lives, creating various types of Jewish religious feminism (Irshai, 2010).

In summary, this context supplies the background for understanding general notions of gendered Orthodox life. It should further be noted that issues of gender and sexuality are in flux in contemporary Orthodox Jewish life (Irshai, 2010; Fader, 2013; Kaufman, 1991). While tradition and *Halacha* create a patriarchal worldview and practices, modern notions of romantic love, sexuality, and feminism trickle into Jewish Orthodox discourse, and people in these communities have to negotiate them. This negotiation will be seen in the analysis offered in the rest of the chapter. While this negotiation also happens offline, the online digital discourse allows for more anonymity and speaking of taboo matters (Gottesman, 2009; Pitkowsky, 2011). Furthermore, as discussed in the second chapter, the digital discourse allows researchers access to the process of normalization and negotiation. The participatory aspects, coupled with the archival abilities, present a discourse that is fossilized, enabling us to decipher the ways gender and sexual norms are constructed and negotiated in this Orthodox discourse. That is, this background information helps situate the negotiation that happens online in terms of how these gendered topics are generally conceptualized in Orthodox Jewish discourse.

### **Making Sense of Jewish Gender and Sexual Norms: Analyzing Q&A**

The rest of this chapter supplies the actual analysis of the sampled material, analyzed using the tri-layered critical discourse analysis model. Unlike the previous

chapter that focused on Q&A material, the sample analyzed here contains articles and videos made by the websites' writers and editors. That is, the material was generated by the website creators for user consumption and does not include questions from the users – it is material more similar to mass media (creator to public) than to the bottom-up content discussed in the previous chapter. The material, a total of n=48 articles and videos, was collected either by searching for specific gender- or sexuality related terms (such as “wedding,” “women,” etc.) or collected directly from the specialized sections for women or for family on each of the three websites (Chabad.org, Aish.com, and Kipa.co.il). The analysis examines how gender and sexuality are constructed and negotiated in this sample from the online Orthodox discourse.

The tri-layered analysis suggests that three elements of the discourse be examined: 1) the technological affordances, 2) the religious cultural context, and 3) the discursive strategies. The analysis begins by examining the structure and design of the three websites in order to highlight what kind of features the websites offer and how these features afford a specific type of discourse. The second layer of the analysis explores how religious language is understood and utilized in this discourse. Finally, the last and most detailed section of the analysis examines the way language is used to regulate, promote, or resist gender and sexual norms. The chapter ends with a summary that highlights the findings from each layer and spells out the specific discursive strategies observed in the analysis.

***Analysis: Technological affordances.*** This section examines the technological affordances and how they are used to construct the Orthodox digital discourse. As

discussed earlier in this dissertation, technological affordances refer to the technological features, the design aspects of the websites, and what they enable the users to do (the affordance).

As a brief overview, the websites of Kipa.co.il, Aish.com, and Chabad.org invite users to interact with the material they present in various ways: through comments in the websites' comment sections (all three websites offer this), sharing the specific article on Facebook (available only on the Aish and Chabad websites), liking the specific article on Facebook (Kipa), using other social networking websites (Aish and Chabad), commenting using your Facebook profile (Kipa and Aish), forum (Kipa), and the option to email/print articles (all three websites). In what follows I briefly describe how the technological features are used specifically on each website and in general and point to some possible techno-social structures and how they create a discourse in which gender and sexual norms can be negotiated.

Figure 13. Related articles on Aish.com.



Aish.org offers an inviting webpage design for engagement, by providing interactive buttons in multiple areas of their website layout. At the outset of accessing any web article, the user can share the article on Facebook, Twitter, email, and many other social networking outlets, as well as print the article. The sharing feature is the same “add this” button described in the previous chapter: one button the web designer adds which then allows sharing the article on various sharing platforms. Furthermore, the user can also click on the name of the author of the article they are reading, using a hyperlink that will send them to the author’s various works and biography. Aside from the author’s biography, users will also find various “pushed” related articles (see Figure 13). In comparison, the Q&A pages discussed in the previous chapter tend to stand alone, and not offer access to either the author’s biography or related articles. After reading (or scrolling through) the article, the user is again offered the option of sharing

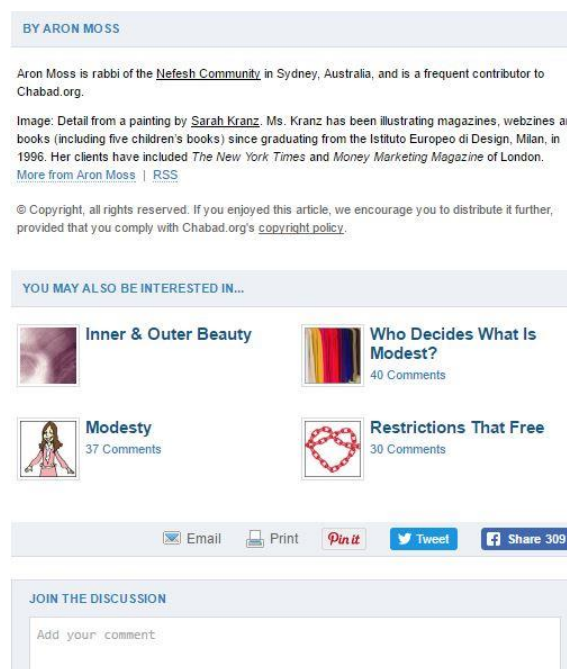
the article via SNS, emailing the article, exploring other related or featured articles, giving *Tzedakah* (charity) to Aish.com, subscribing to Aish.com email updates, or the option of commenting on the article they just read.

Chabad.org also offers various formats for engagement, but in comparison to Aish.com it does not offer as many SNS outlets, or the option to comment using your Facebook profile. This does not make Chabad a less active page – in fact, between the three websites, Chabad has the most comments in total (n=614) and the most Facebook shares (n=1936). At the outset of the interaction with the page, the user can see how many comments this web article has, go straight to the discussion in the comment section, email the article, print it, pin the article on Pinterest, or share the article on Facebook or Twitter. The user can also follow the hyperlink associated with the article's author's name to see more work by that author. After reading the article, we find a short blurb about the author's biography, more related articles, again the options to print, email, etc., and the invitation to "join the discussion" (see Figure 14). Some of the related articles suggested appear with the number of comments they receive. This may suggest that the Chabad web designers are interested in promoting interaction and discussion.

Kipa.co.il offers fewer interactions related to reading and reacting to articles, although more interactions on the website itself (such as forums and website registration). At the beginning of a web article, after a headline summarizing the article, the user can only like the article using Facebook. No other SNS sharing or liking is offered. The name of the author is not hyperlinked to their previous work. While reading

the article, the user will encounter quite few advertisements on the page, compared with Chabad and Aish. After reading, the user can again like the article on Facebook, print or email it, read other articles (featured articles, not related ones), and comment using either their Facebook profile, their Kipa profile, or anonymously using the website comments platform.

Figure 14. Example for author biography and related articles from Chaad.org.



As in the previous chapter, here too most users commenting in Kipa choose to do so anonymously. Out of the total  $n=146$ , only  $n=14$  are submitted using Facebook profile, and  $n=14$  are submitted using the Kipa login username; the vast majority of

comments (n=118) are submitted in complete anonymity. (The Kipa usernames are also anonymous, as users can choose whatever nickname they want. However, registered users can be contacted by other users, who can send them a message, or by the website administrators.) Kipa.co.il also offers the ability to add tags to each article (see Figure 15). As discussed in the previous chapter, only users registered with their Kipa username can add tags to articles.

In general, on all three websites, comments are the most interactive aspect of the reactions possible to users, which means users not only spread or share existing material, but also actively create new “material.” That is, the interactive features on all three websites enable and perhaps even encourage a discourse in which “everybody” can participate. In other words, the discourse created by the technological affordances of these websites is a participatory discourse. In total, for the n=48 articles there were n=1103 comments using the website platform, and n=18 comments using Facebook profiles to comment.

Compared to the comments noted in the previous chapter, in these comment sections it was much harder to label comments as “supportive” or “resisting,” for several reasons. First, the articles themselves are different in nature from the authoritative rabbinical answers presented in the Q&A chapter, and therefore do not always represent the “authority.” In fact, some articles push the boundaries of the acceptable rabbinical position (Tzukernik, n.d.; Ma-Tov, 2016). In these cases, it is unhelpful to count how many comments resisted or supported, but much more helpful to understand the position toward the negotiation of the gender/sexual norm taken in the article and in the



comment. Secondly, in many cases, the users start debating other issues or fighting among themselves, without necessarily directing the arguments towards the article, and in these cases, the “support” or “resist” positions are fluid and perhaps even unhelpful. In these comments and articles, what needs to be highlighted, I argue, is the negotiation and molding of discursive strategies and their results, which will be further developed in the discursive strategies layer of the analysis. In that section, I will also highlight the reoccurring opinions that are most discussed in this online discourse.

Figure 15. Bottom of the page from Kipa.co.il. (English translation offered in the red boxes.)

The screenshot shows the bottom section of a webpage from Kipa.co.il. At the top, there is a 'Tags' section with the text 'תגיות: אירועי בנות, אירועי הבנים, פמיניסטיות, פסח' and a 'Like' button indicating '2 people like this. Sign Up to see what your friends like.' Below this is an advertisement for 'מקומכם איתנו! הפקולטה להנדסה בבר-אילן' (Ad). The 'Other Articles' section features three article thumbnails with titles in Hebrew. Below the articles is the 'Facebook Comments' section, which includes a '1 Comment' count, a 'Sort by Newest' dropdown, and a comment box. A single comment is visible, dated May 7, 2016. At the bottom is the 'Website Comments' section, which has a 'כתוב תגובה' (Write a comment) button and a text input field for the user's name.

Aside from creating a participatory discourse, the use of technology to comment and share also helps us understand if a certain opinion is acceptable or not to the mainstream users of the sites. Namely, sharing and liking operate as communicative tools, correcting or accepting social norms. While the ability to comment can be used to air resisting views and for the more democratic practice of negotiation, the technological affordances of sharing, I argue, are used to solidify and strengthen the acceptable hegemonic perspectives. That is, assuming users of SNS tend to share things they agree with or that somehow resonate with them (Hermida, 2014), articles that are more shared therefore represent either more agreed-upon perspectives, or perspectives the users want to promote, and thus make more acceptable. In either case, the use of sharing can be thought of as a technological practice of hegemonic normalization; thus, it works as a tool of power in this discourse.

Although all three websites do seem to invite and encourage interaction, they do so in subtly different ways. While Aish's emphasis is on the variety of tools for interaction, offering more than a hundred different social networking outlets for interaction, Kipa focuses on in-site interaction, and only allows email and Facebook as an external (i.e., outside of the Kipa website) modes of sharing the content. This more restrictive approach to external interaction can be understood as part of Kipa's overall attempt to create a digital enclave (Campbell and Golan, 2011). Chabad's and Aish's digital purposes are to spread their messages, so utilizing the technological affordances of sharing makes sense. Kipa on the other hand, wishes to create a communal space, one that has clear boundaries of what it contains. When it comes to the issues of gender and

sex, the idea of a scared digital enclave plays an important part. For example, many users consider what is discussed on Kipa as “not appropriate” for this website, thus defining the digital space as a religious enclave, subject to the rules of decency and modesty appropriate to sacred spaces. For Chabad and Aish, which do not strive for this goal, the public discussion of Jewish gender and sexual norms becomes not only a communal concern, but an apologetic or even proselytizing text, meant to showcase the beauty and strength of the Jewish religion.

In sum, while each website has a subtly different approach to technology that seems to reflect that specific community’s goals and needs, all three websites offer interactive and social media sharing affordances. Although these websites create their own content (news, articles, videos, etc.), and they are not user-generated platforms (such as, for example, Facebook or YouTube), each of the websites allows and seems to encourage user participation. The interactive features of the websites structure a discourse in which every user can (and is encouraged to) participate. While these websites do not depend on user participation for content, all three websites seem to promote the inclusion of various voices and users’ opinions. This, I argue, creates a structure that promotes a participatory discourse. The ability to comment, more so than the other interactive options, also allows for resistance in the negotiation of gender and sexual norms and meaning – and indeed, as the analysis of the discursive strategies highlights, some users take advantage of the comment section to disagree with the author or push back against general traditional religious notions of gender or sexuality. Furthermore, sharing, to varying degrees, is also important for the websites. Sharing

might not be as participatory as commenting, but through sharing users can enact agreement, thus fortifying a specific opinion. In these ways, the negotiation in this digital discourse takes place through sharing and liking behaviors, as well as through “verbal” disagreements. However, as Balsamo reminds us, the use of this technology is shaped by the already existing gendered worldviews. As will be seen from the analysis of the discursive strategies, on more than one occasion the technological affordances of sharing and commenting reflect traditional religious patriarchal structures. The next section will explore how religious terminologies inform the discourse alongside the technological ones described here.

***Analysis: Religious cultural context.*** The next layer of analysis offered in this chapter is focused on religious terminology and more generally, the part religion plays in this online discourse. Religious terminology refers to religious canonic texts (such as the *Torah* and *Halachic* texts), religious terms (such as religious denomination, or specific religious practices/rituals), and more generally, religious theology (for example, the Jewish concept of creation). As noted before, most of the authors are not official religious leaders or teachers, but they still use religious teachings as sources for the process of meaning making. That is, religious cultural context plays an important role in this online discourse for meaning making by framing the worldview through which the authors of the articles explain gender norms. In the previous chapter, which focused on practice, the religious terminology mostly used was *Halachic*, or legally-focused. Since this chapter deals with meaning of gender and sexual norms rather than practice, the religious cultural context used tends to be more theological or spiritual. However, the

type of religious language being used in this discourse seems to differ from website to website. While in the previous chapter, generally, the use of religious cultural context was similar throughout the sites (although Aish did seem to use more *Halachic* sources than the other two websites), in the sample collected for this chapter, the differences in the use of religious language are more distinct. As will be seen from the analysis, while the traditional, restrictive, and essentialist understanding of gender seems consistent across websites, the religious cultural context that supports this understanding of gender differs from website to website. Therefore, instead of focusing on the four themes described in the introduction to this chapter, this section first reviews each website's use of religious terminology, then draws general conclusions about the use of religious language in this discourse. The analysis conducted in this section examines how religious cultural context is used to explain and negotiate gender and sexual norms. As will be seen from the analysis in this section, each website uses religious cultural context in slightly different ways. On Kipa.co.il, the focus and use of religious language is communal and *Halachic* – explaining gender behavior by focusing on the rules that men and women should adhere to. On Aish.com, the religious terminology used explains gender norms as traditional, but adds an empowering, personal aspect to being (a religiously correct) “man” or “woman.” Finally, on Chabad.org, the religious cultural context used explains gender norms as something spiritual and mystical.

For most of the article authors and users commenting on Kipa, the type of religious language used is related either to legalistic, *Halachic* debate, or to the definition of the community. For example, Kipa features a series of videos that speak

about intimacy in a “kosher” way (this will be further expanded on later in the chapter). One of the most daring videos advises religious users to not have penetration on the wedding night, as traditionally instructed (Ma-Tov, 2016). In the comments section reacting to this video, some of the users utilize *Halachic* language to argue against the video presenter, for example: “Please open the *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deaa* sign 182 [religious *Halachic* books] ” (Ma-Tov, 2016, comment #4). In a different video, the video presenter begins by citing the *Torah* (Yeser-Weinstein, 2016), thus framing her argument in terms of religious textual authority. In a similar fashion, author Miriam Adler promotes her feminist perspective by rephrasing the Passover *Haggada* and using the bible (Adler, 2016). That is, traditional religious sources – such as *Halacha* and *Torah* – are used in Kipa as a source of epistemic authority in the negotiation of gender and sex.

Another way in which religion is used on Kipa is to establish and negotiate the community’s borders. For example, reacting to Adler’s feminist perspective, users comment, “In short, you are a Conservative” (Adler, 2016, comment #1), and, “Reform Feminist. These are Reform words [both references to the Reform religious denomination]. Disrespecting and lack of faith in the Verbal Torah and abandoning the words of Sages” (Adler, 2016, comment #4). As can be seen from these comments, users employ religious group division as a device to explain what is “right/wrong” thinking. Namely, they use other religious denominations as examples of having “wrong” gender norms. If you are a feminist, then you must be Reform, and thus, an “Other” or “Out.” Creating these religious boundaries goes both ways, when users with a more progressive

mindset call out stricter articles and comments as written by “ultra-Orthodox” and “crazy” (Greenwed, 2015; 2016l). In this way, users on Kipa employ religion not only as a textual source, but also as an othering tactic – group belonging becomes a way of marking the boundaries of acceptable gender norms and meaning.

Aish authors use religious language in a different way, to define and create the boundaries of Jewish peoplehood and heritage, of what it means to be Jewish. Throughout their website, Aish tries to promote an ideal Jewish world and to be a resource for “Jews everywhere” (Aish, 2016). For example, one of the articles discussed in this sample positions itself to define “The Jewish” perspective, titling the article “Jewish View on Gender Differences” (Heller, 2000). In this article, the bible is used to promote a perspective that is framed as universally Jewish, and at the same time specifically personal/individualistic. According to the author, Tziporah Heller: “To get a clear picture of the Jewish view of womanhood, we must go back to the beginning – the *Torah*.” She goes on to explain the way we should conceptualize this Jewish canonic text: “The *Torah* is a path to self-actualization, to spiritual growth” (Heller, 2000). This dual approach to religious terminology as a source of traditional/ideal/ethnic meaning on the one hand, and the personal/relational/therapeutic on the other, can be seen in other articles across Aish. For example, even in the BuzzFeed style “Dating with Dignity,” the author writes:

Judaism teaches us that the relationship of spouses to each other should be “to love her as much as he loves himself, and to respect her even more than he respects himself” (Yevamos 62b). As esteemed psychiatrist Rabbi Dr. Avraham Twerski noted in his article, *Marriage That Endures*: “It is of interest that Rambam, in citing the Talmud, reverses the order and places respect before love. Why? Because it is unrealistic to expect that

one can have so intense a love from day one. It takes time for true love to develop. However, respect is something that can begin on day one.  
(Teichman, 2016)

Here, canonic and *Halachic* sources such as the *Rambam* and the *Talmud* are used as secondary sources mentioned in a pop/self-help religious book, *Marriage That Endures* by Rabbi-Doctor Avraham Twerski. Like the previous article, a general notion of “Judaism” is presented (“Judaism teaches us”), portraying Judaism in a simplistic and monosemic way – offering only one possible interpretation and disregarding the multiplicity of meaning these texts have (Dosick, 1995). Furthermore, the sources used and the purposes of the teaching are aimed at individual help and self-growth (rather than a *Halachic* or theological debate). Religious language is still used in the sample from Aish (although not widely – the word *Torah* only appears in three articles, and the word God in six within this Aish sample) – but the *Halachic* sources are replaced with a more individualized approach, by mentioning self-help books, the work of therapists, and generally viewing the religious sources as a “path to self-actualization.”

In general, the Chabad website has a similar attitude toward seeing religious sources as a path for “growth,” but the sources and interpretations are a bit different. For Chabad, being a Messianic religious community, as previously discussed, it is the mystical texts and the words of their Rebbe that are the sources of meaning. Many of the texts written describe gender difference, for example, as part of a mystical “plan” for the world – as part of *Kabbalah*. These texts suggest that understanding your feminine side is similar to connecting to the deeper parts of your soul – a deep, transcendental connection. For Chabad writers, the *Torah* is more than a path or a book of laws, it **is** the



world. Based on *Chassidic* and *Kabbalistic* teachings, the *Torah* is the blueprint and the map of how our world is, and a reflection of the divine world. So, for example, when writing about women's status in Judaism, author Chana Weisberg tells her readers: "Because *Torah* is not man-made, it contains the **greatest infinite secrets** for each of us to uncover, to live more connected and meaningful lives. Since *Torah* is G-d's **divine blueprint** for creation, it teaches us how to elevate our world" (Weisberg, n.d., my emphasis). Thinking of the *Torah* not only as a legal book but as a mystical book full of secrets allows Chabad writers to use religious language to give a spiritual meaning to gender roles and to elevate behaviors such as housework to a "holy" or "spiritual" status. Weisberg goes on to explain gender differences and roles through this mystical-religious language:

Just as the male and female are biologically different, we have specialized psychological, biological, emotional and spiritual qualities and needs. Kabbalistic teachings approach the masculine and feminine as distinctive, yet equally important, cosmic forces necessary for our world to function. [...] I love the concepts of feminine receptivity, nurturance, intuitiveness, revealing the essential divine spark within the physical, releasing and unpackaging [sic.] the Divine energy from the bounds of our world, and the beautiful role of the feminine *Shechinah*. These concepts are readily found in the esoteric dimension of the *Torah*, and we need to teach the world to value these feminine qualities. (Weisberg, n.d.)

Throughout the Chabad sample, similar religious language is used to elevate the feminine while keeping the female at home. A woman's spirituality is considered not only different from a man's, but also higher. Thus, she does not need certain *Mitzos* (commandments) or any public practice or leadership, because her connection with God is internal and deeper. When it comes to demanding more rights, some Chabad writers use this elevated language to write against such demands. (If you are already elevated as

feminine, why would you want to become more similar to the masculine?) On the other hand, some Chabad writers embrace the feminist movement (to a certain degree) and use the mystical-religious language to explain it as a messianic moment. In an explicit attempt to make this connection, author Shimona Tzukernik writes:

**At this future time, the unique superiority of the mystical source of womanhood**—and its associated receptive and feminine principles—will be revealed. [...] The **Lubavitcher Rebbe** presents a fresh take on the feminist movement. He notes that we have already seen evidence of this cosmic shift in recent times with the radical changes in the place of women in society. Read that as “the feminist movement,” and all the changes it has brought. Certainly, as with all social change, there have been both positive and less beneficial results. **Regardless, from a spiritual perspective, these changes are a result of the coming era when feminine principles and ways of being will come clearly to the fore.** (Tzukernik, n.d., my emphasis)

In this text and in other comments and texts throughout the Chabad sample, the feminine is considered more spiritual, and, more importantly, unique. Thus, in these texts, gender and sexual norms derive their meaning through religious language that is mystical and spiritual.

Lastly, especially on Chabad and Aish, but also on Kipa, alongside the religious cultural context, this online discourse reveals a use of modern and secular language and terms, such as psychological or medical concepts. For example, in an Aish article discussing forgiveness in a relationship, author Morris Mann writes:

An important method of repairing that relationship is to apologize. [...] Marital therapists report that authentic apology is a very important feature of a healthy marriage. [...] Psychologists have reported that there are differences in how men and women see and experience apologies [...] Psychologists have long emphasized the health benefits of letting go of grudges and bitterness even without the second party apology. (Mann, 2017)

In this text, Mann utilizes knowledge from therapists and psychologists (without citing or hyperlinking), not from rabbis or religious writings. While there are extensive Jewish religious writings on the subject of forgiveness (see, for example, Rabbi Soloveitchik's *On Repentance*), Mann chooses modern, secular sources and approaches to this topic rather than the religiously-inclined approach. This modern terminology frames meaning as deriving from the joy of self-discovery and being loyal to oneself, not to a divinity. The semi-therapeutically-inclined language is evident especially in areas of difficulty – specifically, dating, marriage, and intimacy. Out of n=25 article and video authors, sixteen are some kind of therapists, according to their biographies online (n=8 in Kipa, n=4 for Chabad, and n=4 for Aish). Some are educated in secular schools, such as Emuna Braverman (Aish), who has a degree in Clinical Psychology from Pepperdine University, and some have created their own version of Jewish therapy. For example, Shimona Tzukernik (Chabad), known as “The *Kabbalah* Coach,” created a therapeutic application of *Kabbalah* known as *The Method*. These authors’ therapeutically inclined approaches are present in the texts and give the concepts of gender meaning at the level of the personal, the individual.

Generally in this sample, religious language is used in a simplified fashion, using religious terms in a monosemic way (similar to the findings from the previous chapter), and in a way that supports a type of (neoliberal) language which is focused on the individual. Thus, gender norms are largely framed in this discourse, not as a communal, societal commitment, but as a commitment to oneself, a discovery and maintenance of being true to your divine/“Jewish”/true self. This sets the stage to frame religious gender

norms as meaningful from an individualistic position. In other words, by and large, religion is not used in this discourse to neatly organize and explain gender norms because of tradition or *Halacha* (“you must do so because God said so”), but rather religion is used to explain gender norms because of “you” (“this is what you want”), because of their personal or spiritual meaning. Namely, gender and sexual norms derive their religious meaning from constructing a spiritual/religious identity.

In summation, religious cultural context plays out in this discourse in several ways: first, we note that religious language (texts, practices, and concepts) is accompanied by secular, therapeutic language (as in the example with Mann’s article noted above). Second, when religious terms are evoked in this discourse – use of religious texts or mentioning religious group politics – they are used in a way that minimizes complexity and presents the religious worldview and terminology (the *Torah* or, in a different example, the Reform denomination) as clear, undisputed, and monosemic. Lastly, religious cultural context is used to evoke a spiritual/sacred meaning for gender norms – for example, a messianic meaning (as in the example with Tzukernik’s article mentioned above) focused on spiritual joy and worth. This will be further exemplified in the discursive analysis; a type of neoliberal logic seems to emerge in this Orthodox digital discourse, one that places meaning in the subjective position as the individual’s choice and joy. In this fashion, traditional religious perspectives are normalized through individualistic religious empowerment. This is very much in line with Foucault’s notion of governmentality, in which a subject is created whose needs and aspirations are in line with the powers that rule. As Wallis argues, “[S]elf-awareness

is fundamental to the way governmentality operates, for how can a subject desire to be a self-improving agent without internalizing discourses of the necessity to continue to work on the self?” (2013a, p. 350). Here, we see the individual as a self, enacts their understanding of their gendered duties in a way that is understood as joyful, empowering and self-fulfilling. In this discourse, users become self-aware to their ‘true’ self when they perform as a religious woman – an empowered, almost divinely inspired, giver. Through constructing herself as a divine giver, the female subject learns to associate her duties and limitations – her oppression – as her own wish and desire. Thus, the subject in these online texts has internalized the religious rules and regulations, and in so doing strengthens and enforces the traditional, strict gender and sexual norms on both herself and her peers.

So far the analysis has highlighted the digital and religious aspects of the discourse. It showed how the websites encourage an interactive and participatory discourse through technological affordances. In this section the “Orthodox” aspect of the discourse was analyzed. What can be seen from the analysis of the religious aspects of the discourse is that religious, and to some extent, modern terminologies work together to create a discourse that is focused on self-growth, self-actualization, and (to a lesser degree) identity politics (othering). Jewish religious terms are used in these websites (writers and users mention *Halacha*, *Torah*, God, the Rebbe, etc.) to foster a discourse from which gender and sexual norms derive their meaning, supposedly, personal choice and spiritual growth. The next section will highlight more clearly the type of discursive

strategies used to resist and maintain, to negotiate, Jewish gender/sexual norms and their meaning.

*Analysis: Discursive strategies.* In this section I explore the language users and article writers employ, which discursive strategies they take to negotiate and construct the concepts of gender and sexuality in Orthodox Jewish online discourse. The content examined in this chapter includes both the articles/videos themselves, and the comments to them, divided into four themes: feminism, marriage, intimacy, and motherhood. In these online articles, the comments act as a reaction and deliberation of opinions, continuing the conversation into the comment section. Reading the comments alongside the articles offers a fuller story of the specific worldview or meaning-making process stated in the article. While the Q&A in the previous chapter were relatively easy to arrange, since they are organized by topic, and I pre-selected the topics discussed (masturbation and *Shmirat Niggia* [abstaining from touch between the sexes]), I chose to arrange the analysis by separating the questions, answers, and comments. However, in this material, comments and articles are read together, as discussed above. Ergo, to organize the material, I focus around four main themes that emerged from an initial analysis of the material: Feminism, Marriage, Intimacy, and Motherhood. I used the coding software Dedoose to read through and code the online sample material. While reading through the material, these four themes and related topics of discussion were noted. The selection of these themes is not meant to suggest that these are the only issues that structure Orthodox digital users' gender view. Instead, these themes are meant to help focus and organize the analysis so that it can highlight the discursive strategies

through which gender and sexuality are constructed, negotiated, and normalized. The following analysis will focus on each of these four themes separately, highlighting the discursive strategies taken by the authors and the users' comments to negotiate and construct Jewish norms of gender and sexuality.

*Thematic analysis: Feminism.* Feminism, either as referring to the social movement, the call for gender equality, or even just a signifier of modernism/secularism, plays a major role in the online discussion of gender norms. This sub-section analysis examines the ways in which feminism is understood and used by the authors and users of the websites. As will be seen from the analysis, "feminism" in this discourse is either negated or negotiated. In some of the articles, it is farmed as a destructive and dangerous force; in some, it is an ideology that Judaism needs to conform to; and in other articles, authors and users promote their own specific kind of feminism, a Jewish feminism.

On all three websites, the sample included at least one article that explicitly deals with feminism, but even in those articles that discuss modesty or "finding the right one," feminism is mentioned in the comment section. Overall, n=118 excerpts were labeled with the code feminism, by far the most frequent code and n=25 out of n=48 articles were coded with feminism. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, Orthodox Judaism does not inherently oppose feminism, but neither does it embrace the concept. Rather, Orthodox Judaism as a denomination offers a variety of reactions to feminism (Davidman, 1990). Religious individuals with feminist sensitivities might choose a passive form of resistance, like covering their hair in public but learning *Talmud* at home, or an active form of resistance, such as creating egalitarian Orthodox

synagogues in Jerusalem (Israel-Cohen, 2012). Feminists might choose to leave Judaism altogether, or at least abandon *Halacha* and, as a result, Orthodox Judaism (Irshai, 2010). Few try to create a combination of Orthodox Feminism (Halpern and Safrai, 1998). By and large, however, most consider combining the terms Orthodox Judaism and feminism an oxymoron (Hartman, 2007), and while some Orthodox communities might accept a certain amount of equal rights “outside” (e.g., allowing women access to education), most Orthodox communities reject feminism in the synagogue and at home. This is true especially when feminism seems to endanger traditional norms or *Halachic* rules, as it so often does.

This attitude is also reflected in the online discourse. That is, the general approach towards feminism is somewhat hostile, considering it as a “male-bashing agenda” (Crispe, n.d.), or avoidance, such as in the following comment: “I am not a feminist – never wanted to be like men, or have a powerful position, but I most certainly don’t look for a husband who will be my ‘leader’” (Braverman, 2006, comment #25). Some authors and commenters see feminism as a movement that has harmed both men and women. For example, the article “Mom with a View: Men’s Rights” starts with the assertion, “After years of taking a beating by women and the feminist movement, it seems like men are finally starting to stand up for themselves again” (Braverman, 2006). This attitude is especially explicit for writers on the Aish website. Similar to the author of “Mom with a View,” Tziporah Heller explains her perspective about men and women in her article “Jewish Views on Gender:”

To get a clear picture of the Jewish view of womanhood, we must go back to the beginning – the Torah. [...] But why, then, didn’t God create



two identical beings? The answer is that in order to maximize giving, the recipient must be different from the giver. [...] But what are these differences? [...] The] feminine manifestation and strength is more internal, while the masculine focus and expression is more external. [...] This emphasis on the internal has many practical implications. [...] For example, women, who are more internal – and in a sense private – will usually find their direct connection to God most efficiently through private prayer. Therefore Judaism encourages them to express this through regular daily private prayer, although of course they can pray in a synagogue if they prefer. [...] Gender is a pivotal quality in each person's identity. Men and women are fully equal but different – and that difference is good. [...] God, in His infinite wisdom, created humans as two distinct genders in order to enable them to complement and fulfill each other. Each gender should appreciate and use its special strengths. [...]

King Solomon's beautiful poem *Eishes Chayil*, "A Woman of Valor," describes all the different roles a woman can play, including teacher, businesswoman, mother, wife – but all of them as a woman. By giving her the tools to grow morally and spiritually while maximizing her unique strengths, the Torah frees a woman to be herself with self-esteem and joy – and no apologies. (Heller, 2000)

Although feminism is not mentioned explicitly in this article, I suggest it may be read as part of the online Jewish discursive negotiation of feminism, since it does deal with the issues at the heart of any form of feminism – gender relations, differences, and meanings. According to Heller, the Jewish view on gender is that there are gender differences, but both genders should be appreciated and valued. They are "equal but different." This attitude which claims a binary opposition between internal (female) and external (male), in turn explains the division of labor in Jewish religious patriarchal systems – women stay at home because they are good in managing internal affairs, women cannot lead in the synagogue because that activity is defined as external, and leadership in the synagogue is in conflict with their essential nature – they will achieve more spiritual benefits from private prayer. Some discursive strategies should be

highlighted. First, at no point does Heller mention what women cannot do according to *Halacha*. For example, she does not write that they cannot lead service in the synagogue, only that because of women's internal abilities, "Judaism encourages them to express this through regular daily private prayer, although of course they can pray in a synagogue if they prefer." The language is very soft and seemingly non-regulatory: "encourages," "express [yourself]," "although of course they can," and "they prefer". This does two things: It makes the traditional patriarchal structure a matter of choice and of joy, and it portrays traditional female roles as spiritually meaningful. The last sentence of Heller's piece concludes this perfectly: "By giving her the tools to **grow** morally and spiritually while **maximizing** her unique strengths, the Torah frees a woman to be herself with **self-esteem** and **joy** – and no apologies" (my emphasis). The spin is quite clear – traditional patriarchal gender roles are not a matter of oppression and denial, but of growth and empowerment for women. I suggest the last phrase, "and no apologies," is a hint at the feminist movement, which robbed women of their essential selves, and made them have to be apologetic about wanting to be internal, a mother and a wife – "themselves." In this way, the subject is governed by itself through concepts such as choice and personal responsibility. This author calls for a type of religious "self-improvement" that encourages the readers to maintain traditional gender roles as an act of personal responsibility. Thus, a form of religious governmentality is enacted through the discursive strategies of self-regulation and self-improvement. Readers are steered into not resisting traditional gender division of labor, by framing domestic duties as a joyful choice.

The contradiction between the prescribed “true” empowered self and the realities of gender segregation and oppression in these societies should, supposedly, result in some form of resistance (as exemplified in Wallis, 2013a). However, it seems that this discursive strategy is by and large accepted and even lauded by users of the website. The article was shared n=148 times on Facebook, which is, in the sample from Aish, relatively high (the fifth most shared article from Aish). Furthermore, the comments in general seem to agree, accept, and laude this approach to gender. Out of the nineteen comments to this article, eleven in some way or another reinforce the article’s perspective. For example: “I loved this article on the differences... Finallyly [sic] something that says it’s o.k. to be what you are created to be” (comment #5). Or, “Excellent! Many questions are answered in this article with both Torah erudition and a splash of secular, worldly [sic] awareness. Very useful in what is a very modern debate” (comment #7). Conversely, not all of the users commenting agree with Heller, and those who disagree make their case quite clear. For example, the anonymous comment: “you stress the differences--what about the similiarities? [sic]” (comment #1), or the comment made by the user Mara, which reads:

Subject: Disagree

I am a heterosexual female. All of my life I have been “man-like”. Why I enjoy relationships, I find emotional involvment [sic] taxing, it is the comraderie [sic] that I crave. I am very facts and figures, very masculine right down to the intimate aspects of my life. I do not possess even a single “feminine” trait. And yet I am comfortable with myself and do not feel like a “freak”. We are not robots or dolls to fit a certain image. We are all individual.(Heller, 2000, comment #15)

Using her personal experience, Mara rejects the article on the basis that some people (herself, in this case) do not fit the mold, so to speak. As a response to Mara's objection one of the users comments, "As the article mentions, everyone is an individual. What you are is what you are, and like every possible set it has its advantages and disadvantages. Understanding male/female polarity, and the different desires/needs that are in play, is still helpful to anyone" (reply to comment #15). The stress in the article and in the comments is on gender differences, and how important it is to "be who you are." What is less explicit are the rights and responsibilities given to each gender, and the (theological/social) inability to move between those rights. That is, if a woman wants to be more "external," from a *Halachic* perspective that will be problematic. This is explained away by redirecting these as "abnormal" to the "natural" "male/female polarity" that is stated in the article. In sum, Aish writers and users tend to react to feminism by implicitly rejecting it, and explicitly creating meaningful gender differences, or rather, by reinstating traditional gender differences but embedding them with meaning and empowerment.

At the Chabad website, a similar attitude toward gender relation is taken by the authors. For example, in the article "The Role of Women in Judaism," the author tells about her experience in a gender studies class, and how the feminist approach made no sense, and she therefore set out to find the Jewish meaning of being a woman (Crispe, n.d.). Other authors take a step further and more clearly call for a unique kind of "Jewish feminism," or more specifically, *Chassidic* or *Chabadnic* Feminism. In her article *Chassidic Feminism*, Rivka Slonim describes the following:

I would describe myself as a Chassidic feminist. The two terms are not mutually exclusive, though their combination is not without tension. [...] I was born into a Chabad-Lubavitch family that never questioned the intellect or ability of a woman. I grew up surrounded by female role-models of strength, character and intelligence.

As I was growing up, there **was nothing I felt was beyond my reach, except perhaps synagogue life as enjoyed by the men.** This often seemed unfair, but there was an understanding that this was just the way it was. As I grew older, **I realized that I enjoyed being female.** My femininity was more than just the way I was; it was a unique part of who I wanted to be and how I wanted to express myself. [...]

**I feel grateful to the feminist movement for the positive changes it has brought for women.** It has brought opportunity, equitable pay and respect to the female half of society. My perception is that the feminist movement has helped society catch up to the Chassidic world. **Today, we see a feminism more grounded in the female self. We see a new generation recognizing the joy and fulfillment in motherhood.** There is a dawning that we women *are* different, biologically, psychologically, intellectually, spiritually and in every other way. (Slonim, n.d., my emphasis)

This type of feminism can be understood as a form of religious “post-feminism,” which essentializes womanhood as unique and inherently different from manhood, not just biologically, but also “psychologically, intellectually, spiritually and in every other way.” Furthermore, this attitude does not challenge the traditional gender relations or division of labor, and views motherhood and femininity as the main form in which women should be celebrated. This type of feminism sees women as essentially more spiritual and more internal, therefore women have no need for public work or leadership positions (for example, not participating in the synagogue, as mentioned in the above article). The article portrays a type of joy and empowerment in the domestic position, by describing women as “role-models of strength, character and intelligence” and their domestic chores (such as being in charge of the kitchen) as a “joining with the Divine.”

Unlike the Aish article, however, this writer is aware of the political or social meanings of traditional gender roles: “nothing I felt was beyond my reach, except perhaps synagogue life as enjoyed by the men.” And although “This often seemed unfair,” she rationalizes this disparity by concluding that “this was just the way it was.” Hence, the logic underplayed in this article is that while gender differences on a personal level are a discovery of “who you really are,” gender differences on the political level are “just the way it is.” The author is not against feminism – she even goes as far as thanking the feminist movement. But she continues to remark that the “feminist movement has helped society catch up to the *Chassidic* world” – implying that the *Chassidic* world is already feminist, and does not need the external, secular feminism, and/or does not need further progress.

The reactions to the article are interesting. On the one hand, the article was not shared widely (only eight shares on Facebook, way below the average sharing in the Chabad sample,  $n=129$ ). This could indicate disagreement, or a wish to not be associated with feminism (as the title of the article is “*Chassidic* Feminism”). On the other hand, out of the  $n=30$  comments to the article,  $n=21$  agree with it and praise Slonim’s writing. For example: “What a wonderful article! Thank you so much for this beautiful expression!” Or, “From this great article I am learning that it is OK to be a traditional Jewish woman and that there are things that we do and there are things that the men do.” Some commenters more explicitly state the theological relation between femininity and the coming of the Messiah, which is the core belief for Chabad followers:

Embracing the conciousness [sic] of Feminism and Chassidius [sic] is **to rejoice in G-d making us a woman!!** There exists an allure of this world

but it is so false and pales when we truly understand and **accept our roles as women, wives, and mothers with all the joy** and glory G-d has intended for us!! **We are now in the Messianic era**, and must be humble and loving as we channel our G-d given spiritually intuitive light. This is truly a gift from G-d to the women. (Slonim, n.d., my emphasis)

In this comment and throughout the Chabad website, the role and status of women is tied to the theological understanding of this current historical moment as the coming of the Messiah. As mentioned in the introduction, Chabad as a movement is following “The Rebbe” (Menachem Mendel Schneerson) who passed away in 1994. The Chabad movement, to a degree, sees Rebbe Mendelson as a messiah figure, and works religiously to bring the days of the Messiah closer. Some even believe we are already in end of days or messianic era (Heilman and Friedman, 2010). This association with the messianic era gives feminism a whole new meaning, a religious one. As mentioned in the analysis of the religious cultural context, some Chabad writers believe that equal rights or the feminist movement are signs of the messianic moment in which we are currently. However, the type of feminism that is to be embraced is a traditional take on feminism, an “equal but different” approach in which women are to be adored for their internal roles as mothers and wives. Woman is a goddess, but a goddess restrained by her femininity to her home.

While Aish and Chabad take either a negating or negotiating approach to feminism, not all users discard the feminist movement in this way. Few users and one author clearly and proudly take a feminist stance and support the feminist movement. In general, authors and users on the Kipa website tend to write and think about feminism not as a religious praising of women (Chabad) or a destructive movement, unnecessary

in Jewish life (Aish), but rather as a movement that Judaism needs to struggle with or conform to. In her article “And You Shall Tell Your Daughter” (paraphrasing the biblical “and you shall tell your son,” Exodus 13:8) Mariam Adler “tells” her daughter that she is a feminist:

- Mom, are you a feminist?
- Yes
- What is a feminist, mom?
- A feminist is a woman (or a man - yes, there are feminist men) that believes that men and women (and all people) were born equal... (Adler, 2016, my translation here and for all excerpts from the Kipa website)

Adler unapologetically describes herself as feminist, and tries to combine her feminist identity with her religious Jewish one. Adler clearly writes in response to the question “why are you a feminist:” “Everyone should get equal opportunities in this world, and equal rights. Equal pay at work, for example. Equal authority in legislation, for example. Yes, even when it comes to ‘our’ rules – *halacha*, decrees, customs. Everyone should have a place in the synagogue” (Adler, 2016). Here religious feminism is not a way to explain women’s internal nature, but a desire for equal rights in both secular and religious spaces.

The reactions to this article are rather harsh. Out of the fourteen comments to the article, only two are supportive, and the others resist in various ways. Some highlight the truthfulness of rabbinical *Halacha* as above social movements such as feminism – for example: “Rabbis decide for men and women, for tall people and short people...” (Adler, 2016, comment #3), or “The god of Israel is true, Moses is true and his Torah is true” (Adler, 2016, comment #10). Others remind her of the inherent differences



between men and women and how they are not equal: “God chooses different people for different tasks [...] people of Israel were chosen [...] the tribe of Levi and sons of Aaron (and not daughters!) were chosen...” (Adler, 2016, comment #7). Still others dismiss her writing as Conservative or Reform (Adler, 2016, comments #1 and #4) and thus “other,” “guarding” what they understand as traditional Orthodox Judaism from feminist influences. Overall, the reactions are negative and strengthen traditional patriarchal Jewish understanding of gender. At the same time, the webmasters of Kipa have Adler as one of their regular writers (written total of n=68 articles in Kipa since 2013), and thus keep this conversation about religious feminism going.

In these three articles, and throughout the sample, feminism is used as a negative term, a necessary development, and as a negotiated term. As a negative phenomenon, the feminist movement is described as destructive and dangerous. According to those holding this perspective, the meaning for being a man or woman is traditional/religiously set, and the feminist movement has distorted it. Religious authority and tradition, and not secular “trends” are how one should make sense of the world, and of gender and sexual norms. In opposition to this view, those who advocate for feminism as a necessary development for religious Judaism, see feminism as a movement that should steadily help women elevate their status in the house, the synagogue, and outside. Those who hold this view consider political and social conditions and see as a problem the inequalities between men and women. The religiously negotiated form of feminism is, in some ways, the most interesting and seems to be the most acceptable to readers (based on sharing practices and positive comments). This view offers a unique kind of “Jewish

feminism” – one that “acknowledges” the differences between men and women and highlights joy and empowerment in traditional roles. Some of those who hold this view also believe that females are essentially more spiritual than men (and as a result do not need leadership positions) and/or that female empowerment is a sign of the coming of the Messiah (Chabad). Through these discursive practices, feminism plays a major role in positioning and making sense of gender relations’ meaning and norms.

*Thematic analysis: Marriage (and being single).* The second highlighted theme is that of marriage. Heterosexual union is the foundation upon which Jewish peoplehood depends, and many of the articles in the “family” or “women” sections of the websites are related to marriage. In this sample, for example, out of n=48 articles, n=26 are about either how to get married or how to maintain your marriage. After the theme of feminism, which included also codes as femininity and gender difference, marriage was the fifth most popular code with n=68 excerpts coded for marriage. These texts either explicitly mentioned words like “marriage,” “husband,” or “wife” or implicitly referred to them (for example, writing, “He wants to be her hero” does not clearly mention marriage, but in the Jewish religious context refers to marriage). Since the topic of marriage also includes texts related to how to run a household (n=43) and the worries of being single (n=19), the codes for housework and single can also be counted in this section. Intimacy is also addressed in articles related to marriage, for example, in articles discussing “the first night,” but deserves a subsection of its own.

Generally, the topic of marriage is addressed in one of the following ways: the importance of getting married/the trouble of being single, how to prepare for your

marriage/wedding, duties and relationships between husband and wife. The last topic seems to be of special interest to readers and is important for understanding the construction and negotiation of gender norms online. The issue of how to prepare for marriage is mostly concerned with intimacy, and as such will be addressed further in the next subsection. The first topic, of the importance of getting married, is especially explicit on the Kipa website, which has not only articles dedicated to it, but also forums such as “Thirty Plus” and “Our Way is Not Easy” (*Lo Kala Dercenu* לא כלה דרכנו – a pun in Hebrew as the word “easy” sounds like the word “bride,” *Kala*). For the Kipa sample, out of n=17 articles, five are about marriage (and three more about the wedding night).

The articles on Kipa tend to take a direct approach, addressing topics such as marital struggles and issues of intimacy. For example, one of the articles in the sample is written by a marriage counselor, who advises people to let go of some of the myths surrounding marriage, such as, for example, the idea that couples should solve all their issues without consulting an external person. His column, titled *Love at Second Glance* begins thus:

What’s the problem with the stigmas that we believe in? That the moment we think “It should be this way, this is my role as a wife, this is what is needed in marriage” then we have no flexibility [...] The husband cannot work otherwise because it contradicts the ‘husband role’ as he sees it... (Grossman, 2016)

This is an interesting statement, as it both affirms that husbands and wives have roles in a marriage that are gender-specific, while at the same time the author asks readers to expand and be more flexible regarding these roles. This expansion and negotiation of

gender roles is not inspired by religious motivations or explained through religious sources or theology, but rather described in therapeutic terms. Namely, the writer's authority does not stem from any religious position, but from his knowledge and training as a marriage counselor. Furthermore, his text calls for better communication between the couple, for flexibility and for keeping an open mind in marriage – thus providing religious individuals with coaching tactics that stem from therapeutic rather than religious context.

Furthermore, the author calls for more preparation and open discussion of marital relations before marriage. It is custom in Orthodox communities that both the bride and the groom receive *Halachic* guidance before marriage, regarding how to engage in intimacy and how to keep family purity. The author of this article suggests that “It would be so good [...] if aside the *halachic* preparation there will be relationship guidance that can save the couple much anguish in the beginning of their marriage...” – that is, while not dismissing the religious (*Halachic*) duties of the newly wed, the emotional and relational aspects of the partnership are the ones being highlighted in this article. Similarly, in the videos related to intimacy, which will be further discussed below, the emotional aspects are highlighted alongside the *Halachic* ones.

The emotional aspects of married life are framed – both in this article and in others across Kipa – with gender differences in mind. For example, in an article discussing marital difficulties, author Odelia Maimon explains that the reason for tensions between married couples is that:

They might be in the same relationship, but from **different points of view**. From a different place. **He as a man. And she as a woman.** He is

married to Soshi [female Hebrew name]. But she is married to Yuval [male Hebrew name]. And it is not always the same. More than that – **she has certain expectations from the relationship, and he has others.** (Maimon, 2014, my emphasis)

Like in the previous article, the reason for marital tensions lies in the inherent differences between the genders – “he is a man,” “he has a role as a husband,” etc. That is, the reason for tensions between the couple, according to Maimon, is that men and women have inherently different points of view of the world. Furthermore, both authors claim that marriage needs to receive more attention in the religious community as something that one needs to work on and needs to feel safe and happy in. While the previous article received zero comments, this article does receive a few comments, and they all seem to disagree. One of the commenters writes, “This is an Egoistic analysis focused on ‘me’ [...] This is not the way of Judaism...” (Maimon, 2014, comment #1).

Another commenter writes:

I disagree. If someone feels like the relationship is lacking (and let's be honest, in 99% of the cases it is the woman who wants more and the man is content) then the problem is with him. He needs to search how to solve it, of course the partner can help and they should to do so to be benevolent to their partner, but the problem is not relational. (Maimon, 2014, comment #3)

What is being discussed and negotiated in these articles, I suggest, are marital norms and expectations of wives and husbands in the Israeli Orthodox religious context. Some of the users and authors in Kipa see marriage in a more traditional light, as a partnership between two people who have different roles, and with the outcome of raising a family and building a “home in Israel” (the traditional blessing couples receive in the Jewish wedding ceremony). Others see marriage as a more romantic and emotional relationship, between two people who find love and meaning in this relationship. These different

views create tension and negotiation, and as a result, I suggest, users reacting to articles written on the topic of marriage tend to be more argumentative. This negotiation is not one directional (website authors as more “therapeutic” or individualistic, and websites readers as more traditional) but rather, Kipa as a website gives various authors a voice to present their perspectives, and users who disagree with those perspectives – be they traditional or individualistic – a place to voice their disagreement. For example, in a different article in Kipa, author Merav Lavi, advises women who are frustrated with their husbands not doing enough at home to “give him a feeling that he is your hero – even if he is not” (Lavi, ). She describes a situation where the wife is annoyed that her husband is not doing enough, but the husband feels that he is doing plenty that is not being appreciated. To solve this situation, Lavi offers women various kinds of advice, some of which include expanding the definition of “doing things at home” to include actions that are outside the household duties, as well as allowing/giving him “time off” when he gets home from work:

When your husband goes to work – He is helping at home! When he goes to study [Torah] – He is helping at home [...] You want him to be a partner? Make him feel that he is a partner when he goes to work, to the Kolel [religious academy], class, to prayer, etc. [...] If you want to be not just a good person, but a good wife, you have the option not only to allow him [rest] but to give it to him yourself. [...] Going forward, every evening when he gets back, smile at him warmly, tell him: ‘I’m happy you are here... I’d like to hear how you are doing and tell you how I’m doing, but first, come, I made you the cake you love and your coffee is ready. Go to your room, drink, read your newspaper [...] I’ll make sure the children won’t bother you... (Lavi, 2015)

Lavi uses the “feminist”/liberal/modern concept of partnership in marriage to maintain traditional division of labor. She tries to argue that when the man is working and you are

taking care of the household, you are both equal partners “at home.”. This traditional ideal – of a devoted wife and a working husband – is quickly rejected by the readers. Users comment: “You are stuck in the sixties!” (Lavi, 2015, comment #1), “I think you forgot that most mothers are also working!” (Lavi, 2015, comment #2), “We are also working outside the home!!” (Lavi, 2015, comment #3) – etc. That shows the topic of gender norms in marriage is constantly negotiated in Kipa.

It could be argued that the topic of marriage is so popular in Kipa because of the growing trend of late bachelorhood in the National Religious society in Israel (Kelner, 2012). One of the articles in the sample is a survey of religious female singles, done by the website *MiShelch* (משלך), which tries to highlight what women are looking for in a man. According to the survey producer: “If one guy will change something in his behavior [and so will get married] – we did our job” (Liefer, 2015). One of the interesting results of the survey is that n=60% of the women who answered the survey said they prefer an equal marriage, and n=40% answered in favor of a traditional one. Furthermore, n=77% said that love is more important than marriage. The survey is not academic, nor does the website supply information about the methodology (how many people, what type of sampling), and thus should be taken with a grain of salt. However, the presentation of the survey is notable – especially how it highlights the “phenomenon” of singlehood with aim of reducing it. It is also worth noting that the article and survey are presented as a way of understanding “what women want,” or as the author of the article explains, “The survey that was published this week asked all the hard questions about what actually are single religious women looking for in the men

they date, how they want him to look and act and also what they don't want" (Liefer, 2015). The question of what "women want" seems to be part of the way in which marriage and gender norms are tried and negotiated. While on Kipa most of the focus is on obtaining and maintaining marriages, and gender is only discussed as a by-product on Aish, on Chabad, as will be discussed below, gender relation and the meaning of being a woman or man is more clearly articulated in relation to marriage.

This material from Aish includes two articles written by Emuna Braverman, titled "What Women Really Want" (Braverman, 2004) and "What Men Really Want" (Braverman, 2004a) and two videos starring Rabbi Tzvi Gluckin titled *Marriage – For Men Only* (Gluckin, 2008) and *Marriage – For Women Only* (Gluckin, 2008a). The articles have received the most comments within the Aish sample (n=58 and n=98, respectively), and the videos, while not as popular, still received more comments than the average for Aish (n=25, and n=26, respectively). Although the articles and videos are authored by different people, they seem to indicate similar conclusions – men need respect, women need love. Braverman's articles are quite explicit about this, and claim further that if men do not get respect and women do not get love in a relationship, their marriage is in danger:

**What Men Really Want:** It's not complicated. What men really want from their wives is appreciation, respect and love. "He wants to be her hero. When she is disappointed and unhappy over anything, he feels like a failure," says relationship expert John Gray. [...] Appreciation, respect and love. Does your husband get nagging, criticism and resentment instead? Do you welcome your husband at the end of the day, or greet him with a barrage of complaints? "You forgot to take out the garbage." "Take your children -- I can't stand it another minute." [...] It's not about who has what job; it's about attitude. "If you treat him like a king, he will treat you like a queen." (Menorat HaMaor). How about this instead?



“Thanks for bathing the kids tonight.” Or: “Picking up dinner was a big help.” (Braverman, 2004a)

**What Women Really Want:** Like men, women certainly want admiration and respect, but our deepest desire is to be loved. As the Chazon Ish, a prominent rabbi of the last century, wrote, “A woman's nature is to find favor in her husband's eyes.” A woman's nature may also be to run big corporations – I’m not suggesting anything limiting or demeaning -- only that love and accolades from our partner is what nourishes and sustains us and our marriages. [...] men need to constantly express and demonstrate their love. How?

Through gratitude. “Thank you for dinner.” “Thank you for watching the kids.” “Thank you for paying the bills.” “Thank you for being there for me.” “Thank you for brightening up my day.”

Through praise. “That was a delicious dessert.” “I like how you decorated the living room.” “Our children are a real credit to you.” “You handled that situation at work very diplomatically.” [...] Some husbands think it's their job to help their wives grow through constant, constructive criticism. Wrong. Not only will your wife not grow, she will be destroyed and your marriage will be too. [...] What do women really want? [...] “The way to handle a woman is to love her, simply love her, merely love her, love her, love her.” (Braverman, 2004)

The ideal marriage portrayed in these articles is one in which the husband and wife, by understanding that the other is like them but also different, give their spouse what they need – love in the case of the woman, respect in the case of the man. To love a woman, according to Braverman, means to show gratitude, to praise her and to not criticize her. To respect a man, according to Braverman, means to make him feel like a hero, and praise him even if he did not help at home – to stop seeing him as a nuisance and start seeing him as “a king.” Rabbi Tzvi Gluckin is even more explicit in his advice to newlyweds by presenting a view of marriage as a partnership between essentially different genders. In his humorous videos, he tells women, “Women! You have married an immature, pre-adolescent, festering ball of ego! Every man thinks that he’s his wife’s

knight in shining armor! He needs to know that you appreciate all that he does, that you depend on him to solve all your problems...” (Gluckin, 2008a). And, according to Gluckin, a wife can let her husband know this by doing the following:

When he comes home from a hard day’s work, he’s exhausted, beaten by his day, and he is not able to listen... you need to be dressed nicely, greet him with a smile, ask him if he needs to sit down, give him a snack, pour him a drink, rub his shoulders, let him know that you appreciate all that he does for you, and give him a few minutes to relax. Once he is comfortable, confident and firmly in charge, then you can stick it to him! (Gluckin, 2008)

The video style and text of the video is seemingly humorous, but the content is consistent with other material on the website in the way in which gender norms are presented and understood. That being said, the users commenting wonder if Gluckin is serious or not: “Is this guy kidding” (Gluckin, 2008, comment #11). Furthermore, while Braverman receives mostly agreement in the comment section, many of the commenters explicitly disagree with Gluckin, claiming that these videos are insulting. As one of the users comments, “[I feel] Disillusioned. I’m not sure what to say: I love Aish, and this was the first thing on the site that ever rubbed me the wrong way. I’m disappointed in the cynicism present in this video, and the attitude toward relationships it presents” (Gluckin, 2008, comment #17). Out of the n=26 comments reacting to the video advising women, n=12 resist this message, while five accept and find it amusing and true. For example: “I’m newly married, and I enjoyed this very much. Frank, funny. Thanks” (Gluckin, 2008, comment #22), or “too true. I have seen this happen with my husband. And since I have returned to work, it has gotten worse. I needed that reminder. Thank you” (Gluckin, 2008, comment #9). The advice video for men is much more accepted by

the users: out of the n=25 comments, n=15 were supportive of Gluckin's message, and only five resisted (five were labeled as "other"). The greater support for the video advising men is probably because the message is deemed less insulting – while in the video to women, Gluckin suggests that women rub their husbands' backs and get them a drink, in the video to men, Gluckin advises men to listen when their wives talk:

Men! Your wife needs to talk! [...] When she starts talking, she'll probably be emotional, and you are probably somehow the cause of her problems. She will launch into a tirade filled with exaggerations seemingly directed at – you! Because you are a thickheaded hyena i.e. the typical male, your giant yet fragile ego will get bruised... you will get defensive, your natural instinct will be to defend yourself – watch out! This is a trap! [...] let her talk, smile, be concerned, empathetic, and listen to her [...]. When she is done, she'll feel good, she got it all out and she knows that you care. (Gluckin, 2008)

This video, although it portrays both men and women in a less than pleasant light, is generally well accepted by the users, as noted above. What is interesting about both the videos, aside from the way they portray gender, is how they operate within the structures of both traditional and internet culture. While the message is similar to that mentioned in other articles, the presentation is inconsistent with the usual Aish style. There is no mention of religious content – neither *Torah* citations nor religious words of wisdom – and the content is not presented as a lecture or article. Instead the editing rhythm is upbeat, with a jump-cut after every few words, extreme close ups on the rabbi's face, and a clean green screen as background. Gluckin looks more like a YouTube celebrity than a rabbi. Presented in a style that is similar to internet media logic, Gluckin's message is easier to dismiss as a joke, but many of the users take it quite literally. It is unclear if Gluckin meant for his advice to be taken seriously, but judging from the

resemblance of the content to rest of the material on the website, he probably did. This could be a case of a rabbi trying to be “cool” by improperly using media logic – using hyperbole while the advice is nevertheless meant to be implemented. It seems that the “culturing” of this media logic works. The religious meaning-making trumps the dismissive tone.

In both articles and videos, traditional gender stereotypes play an important role in “saving your marriage.” According to the logic presented in the discourse, men are emotionally-challenged and respect-motivated, and women are fragile, talkative creatures in need of love. Not only are the stereotypes for each gender traditional, the relationships portrayed are also stereotypical and traditional – women at home, men returning from work, etc. Furthermore, this message claims that for a relationship to work well, men need to be better at listening and women need to show more respect. As one user commented, “Get this word out [...] and marriages would be restored all over the world, along with womens [sic] confidence” (Braverman, 2004, comment #18). While both authors and users who support them seem to understand that this way of thinking is not so popular (at least explicitly) in contemporary western-secular society, they present this traditional “Jewish” type of gender relationship as safer, more meaningful, and better for both men and women. One user defends this patriarchal concept thus:

What’s wrong with this way of thinking? Men & women are different, and react differently. [...] When we realize that we’re completely different species and how the other reacts, and use that knowledge - we communicate better. [...] When this was the way of thinking - pre feminist era, what was the divorce rate? Compare that to today’s society. (Gluckin, 2008a, comment #20)

In other words, this comment and others in the Aish website, call for a “return” to traditional gender roles in order to save marriages and lower divorce rates. Here feminism is mentioned as the source of problems in marriages, and the solution is to understand the inherent differences between men and women and to build heterosexual relationships that are based on that understanding. This suggests another layer of meaning in traditional gender roles: “I need to understand the other person so that I can save my marriage. The other person is of another gender and therefore it is her/his gender that makes them what they are. Therefore, staying within my gender requirements and understanding their gender role will help the important task of keeping the peace and the love in our home.” In other words, it is through gender that we understand the other person in marriage. And through this understanding we keep the peace in the Jewish home. Divorce – although *Halachically* legal – is less than ideal, and more than a few articles in Aish, Kipa, and Chabad discourage it (for example: Aish, 2016h; Moss, n.d.; Mishalei, 2016).

The relationship between men and women in marriage is defined through gender – but also through biological sex. In the Chabad article “The Role of Women in Judaism” (Crispe, n.d.), Sara Esther Crispe tries to answer, “What does it mean to be a Jewish woman?” and suggests that it has to do with females’ unique abilities and their meaning for the Jewish community and spirituality. In her words:

[...] One may ask: “Is being a Jewish woman defined solely in terms of her relationship with another? [her husband]” And, practically speaking, how would this be accomplished? **The obvious responses would be: through being married and having children.**

Yet we find something fascinating. **In halachah (Torah law), a woman is obligated to do neither.** [...] But the man does. He is required to both marry and have children. [...] The only way he can fulfill his responsibilities, then, is if a woman would be willing to help him and fill these roles.

[...] **[B]oth men and women have masculine and feminine traits.** [...] The differences between the masculine and feminine are great. [...] The differences are psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual. And, while we may be a combination of both these masculine and feminine traits, **at the end of the day we are either a man or a woman.** [...]

A woman need not be in the home. **A woman is the home.** [...] Therefore, unlike the masculine, which is the side of our self that is external, which can be viewed by others and is not private, **the feminine is the polar opposite—completely internal**, involving no one else and entrusted to the individual alone. [...] The true meaning of this expression, then, is that when a woman is using her potential in the proper way, she is able to connect to her spouse and help rectify him. **Through her ability to develop, she can take his ideas, his talents, his potential, and internalize them, becoming impregnated with them, until they are ready to be birthed in a public, external way.** And this is how she is a proper eizer kenegdo, a helpmate to him. [...] When our concern is not about what we are obligated to do, but on how we can help another fulfill his or her obligations, this is when **we shine forth and reveal our true power.** But we must begin by looking within, by understanding ourselves, our strengths and our weaknesses, and helping ourselves both from within and from those around us. (Crispe, n.d., my emphasis)

This text suggests a different meaning of what it is to be a man or woman, and a concept of marriage different than the one presented in Aish, although some similarities can be traced. While gender seems to be more complex in this text – “we may be a combination of both these masculine and feminine traits” – eventually, the author takes a decisive and binary gender approach, one that claims that men are men and women are women: “at the end of the day we are either a man or a woman.” The ideal relationship depicted in this text is one that contains spiritual meanings. According to the author Sara Esther Crispe, by being in a correct martial relationship one’s true power is revealed.

Furthermore, ideal relationships are structured by meaning derived from biblical sources, and an ideal woman is conceptualized through the religious concept of *eizer kenegdo*. In other words, being married is a way to be a woman – but only so far as it is part of the feminine qualities of giving and creating. The female – that is, the woman – is born to help others fulfill their obligations. Her path is that of a guide or a helper, and this is a sign of her superior role and spiritual closeness to the divine. This does not have to happen through marriage or childbearing, any way of creating and helping works, but being a mother and wife seems to be the ideal. As one of the users comments:

Woman, Daughter, Bride, Wife [...] the role of the woman brought me to our standing with G-d. As a unit both man and female (treasured people) formed to be the helpmate of Hashem [God]. A marriage covenant. How are we doing 'in our marriage? Are we fulfilling the role to which we have been given? (Cripse, n.d.)

The user seems to agree with the content, like most of the users commenting on this article (n=50 comments supporting the article out of n=83 comments total), and takes the idea of “fulfilling our role” to mean not just as part of society or in a marriage, but our role in our relationship with God. Here, gender roles take on a deep theological and spiritual meaning, and, more uniquely to this study, a gendered-spiritual approach that is semi neo-liberal, that is, self-focused. According to this gendered-spiritual discursive strategy, behaving in a religiously-traditional gendered way is not just a way to maintain social order and keep the family safe, but also – and more importantly – a way to connect to God and to reveal your “true power,” your spiritual path. This article suggests that to be a good woman is to understand oneself as an internal, wise, generous helpmate

who guides her husband and children in their external and internal paths, and by doing so becomes herself closer to God.

Many of the readers find this concept not only acceptable, but also empowering and liberating. A few of the supportive comments start off with the saying “I AM A WOMAN” and go on to express how “This article is beautifully written” (Cripse, n.d.) and to thank the author for an “excellent article.” For example: “I like it! This is **very liberating!** It makes so much sense, yeah! [...] Thank you I enjoyed your article” (Crispe, n.d., my emphasis). For Chabad readers, being a woman is not just about being married – being a woman is a special spiritual talent, which can be expressed through giving, ideally in marriage. This perspective, for many of the readers, is liberating and empowering, both discursive strategies used in this online discourse to reframe traditional gender roles into a matter of choice and meaning. However, this ideal traditional woman portrayed does not satisfy all readers, and some users resist this perspective. This resistance happens in various ways, as can be seen in the following examples:

While I enjoyed reading this article one question remains unanswered. I am an unmarried woman without children and living alone (not by choice!), were does this leave me? Living in a large international, intercultural and interreligious country (Holland) I feel I need something visual to remind myself of my Jewish identity, and I very much wish for something like tzitzit or a veil. Anybody know what I mean??

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Wow well i'm [sic] so glad that my existence in this world is to make sure that my husband is doing everything. Great. As if I don't have enough to worry about just with myself. thank you chabad for another wonderfully sexist article where i [sic] am once again relegated to the kitchen and to motherhood. g-d forbid a woman should want more than that. (Cripse, n.d.)



The first comment represents users who might agree with the message in principle, but their personal experience contradicts these ideals. In the case of this user, she is unmarried and does not have children, and is thus unable to be a wife or mother. As a result, she is seeking other ways to be a Jewish woman – she suggests a ritual dress. Other readers in similar situations have also brought up the need to express their merit not via marriage or childbearing, so one other user suggests an answer for these unmarried, childless, women:

My sister is unmarried and we are very close. She leads a very fulfilling life [...] and she's very loving and giving to everyone, so her contribution is great. There are many ways to be in this world. The union of communion is also what we find in the unity of being part of community, married, or not. [...] Many women are mentors to others and do shine, as one single candle lights the night." (Crispe, n.d.)

According to this user, there are other ways to be a woman aside from marriage and motherhood – through mentorship, loving, and giving. While not contradicting the essence of the article, that is, that women's nature is internal and is focused on giving, this user suggests other ways of giving. She does not suggest leadership, but she does allow for mentorship.

The second commenter is much more aggressive in their resistance. They see the article as "sexist" and are angered by the fact that it renders women only as wives and mothers: "I am once again relegated to the kitchen and to motherhood." The use of the expression g-d instead of God/god in the comment suggests that the writer is a religious person (since religious Jews avoid writing the name of God). That is to say, this is not a case of an internet troll or a person external to the community, but rather a person that is within the community and takes part of the communal online discourse – as can be seen

from their religious language and from the language of familiarity “thank you Chabad for another wonderfully sexist article.” The insider capable of criticism is important to the making of an online discourse – the negotiation that takes place on these websites is not only with (or against) the modern, secular world, but also within the various religious interpretations and practices. Part of the discourse strategies taken by commenters is to align themselves and the authors of the articles with an inside/outside group. Here, for example, the user marks Chabad as a group, to which she/he does not fully belong – the user is religious, but she/he also writes about Chabad as an external entity: “thank you Chabad.” In other instances, especially on the Kipa website, which is marked off as a community-specific web space, users who disagree with an author call them out as being “Reform,” i.e., not belonging to the Orthodox community.

This sub-section highlights how marriage is (re)intensified as an important part of Jewish life, by giving marriage spiritual and social importance, as in the survey for what women are looking for in an ideal husband or in the article by Sara Esther Crispe considering women’s role as *eizer kenegdo*. Furthermore, this sub-section considers how marriage is central to the discussion of gender roles. This online discourse regarding marriage created in these websites further suggests understanding the female gender – women – as giving and internal, and thus people who will flourish from marriage and motherhood, in which they get to give. The discourse not only explains women through their roles as wives, but also marriage through gender role. Thus, maintaining traditional gender roles is presented as crucial for maintaining marriages, and as a way for women (and men) to be empowered in their “true self.”

*Thematic analysis: Body and intimacy.* The third theme discussed in the religious online discourse is that of intimacy or sexuality. This relates to the discussion of sexual norms and ideals, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. In this sample, texts coded as belonging to this theme had explicit mention of sex, or discussion of *Halachic* behaviors related to the female body, such as dressing modestly or keeping family purity (avoiding touch during menstruation). That is, this theme includes various codes: explicit discussion of sex (n=43), as well as modesty (n=42), sexual norms (n=16), *Niddah* or family purity (n=14), and objectification (n=4). I've added topics such as *Niddah* and modesty to the theme of Body and Intimacy because they are both religious practices – behaviors dictated by the religious creed. Namely, it is the *Halachic* code that details that women should cover their hair and wear skirts of a certain length, then further discusses what is considered a modest dress (for example, some Orthodox rabbis rule that women should not wear red because it attracts the eye). These *Halachic* codes are discussed online and are immediately related to how people understand their bodies and their sexual norms. Family purity dictates that married couples do not touch each other during the woman's period and tends to understand the female body in those times as unclean and impure. Modesty is also determined through *Halachic* regulation which dictates what one should wear, the length of clothes, tightness or looseness, colors etc. Modesty is also determined through behavior – how direct or humble one is (especially in relation to the other sex), or, for example, the prohibitions for women to sing in front of men or for women and men to hug or shake hands. While modesty is not explicitly about sex, it is related to how one understands one's body, and proper relations

between the two sexes, as discussed in the introduction and literature review. It is also a highly debated topic in a society that is currently negotiating these norms.

The issue and meaning of modesty seem to generate discussion on all three websites. One approach to modesty associates it with dating and dating difficulties. Two articles from the sample stand out in this regard: an article from Aish titled “Dating with Dignity” (Teichman, 2016), commented on by twelve users and shared  $n=299$  times on Facebook, and an article from Kipa titled “Research: Religious Girls Dressed in Secular Style Will Have Difficulty Finding a Husband” (Greenwed, 2015), commented on by seventeen users and the most liked from the Kipa articles in this sample,  $n=347$  times. These two articles have very different styles, but they both offer not a “modern” explanation and meaning for modesty, rather than a religious legal one. The Aish article is written like a BuzzFeed article or an advice column, with five “pointers” for a successful date. The Kipa article is written in journalistic style, commenting on the “discoveries” of a research without passing *Halachic* or religious judgment on dress codes. The Kipa article begins by describing the phenomenon of “later singlehood” in the National Religious community in Israel, and asks:

What is the reason for later singlehood? [...] Doctor Yaarit Bokek attempted at answering this question by interviewing various young people [...] one of the themes [that arose in these interviews] is that many of these single people have liminal positions in society, that is, they do not belong to any social category [...] young religious women that dress like secular girls, with jeans and tight or sleeveless shirts have a hard time meeting their destined groom, because they do not look religious in the eyes of men that would have dated them if they only knew the women are actually religious. [...] Dr. Bokek concludes for those who want to have a relationship: ‘A person needs to know himself and be consistent in behavior [...] Those who have a unclear religious identity might consider

seeking therapy to establish a consistent and coherent religious and social identity... (Greenwed, 2015)

While the article takes a “neutral” position regarding modesty by not explicitly describing how one should dress, but rather placing advice and judgment in the voice of the academic authority, Dr. Bokek, the users commenting on this article are less than impartial. Many of the comments state clearly and explicitly that women who do not dress modestly are simply not religious: “The reason is simple – they [the women] are not religious. A woman that doesn’t give two cents about *Halacha* is not religious. Even if she says she is” (Greenwed, 2015, comment #2), or “a girl that does not follow *Halacha* is not religious. Why make it more complicated” (Greenwed, 2015, comment #15). That is, these commenters argue that dressing modestly is *Halachically* prescribed, and if a woman does not dress modestly, she does not adhere to *Halacha* and as a result is not considered an Orthodox Jew. Other users lament the strong distinctions within Israeli society between secular and religious people: “The problem is the dichotomy in our society [...] thus a person keeping *Shabbat* will be considered secular because he is not wearing a kipa [Yamaka]...” (Greenwed, 2015, comment #9). Only two users question and negotiate the definition of modesty and its relation to religiosity:

Look at how you talk? The road to rabbi Shienberg [an extreme ultra-Orthodox leader] is very short! [You] immediately blame—‘Not modest...’ ‘Not religious...’ ‘Not like us...’ You have become a disgusting, sick herd, hypnotized by your ‘purity’. I have news for all you ‘pure’ people. You are disgusting. (Greenwed, 2015, comment #14)

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Why are you saying that wearing pants is immodest? What’s the relation? You are right, it’s better to have a skirt that sweeps the road. Insane. Help! There are ultra-Orthodox here... (Greenwed, 2015, comment #17)

Both comments mention ultra-Orthodox as an extremity they believe the Religious National Orthodoxy in Israel has not yet arrived at. In fact, they use that extremity to define what they are not – their understanding of this community is as one that is not extremely modest or obsessed with modesty and purity. These users are upset to discover that the other users commenting are so prejudiced against women wearing pants. What is negotiated here is not only the definition of modesty, but rather, through female modesty the entire community is measured and the female herself will be judged as “religious” or “not religious enough.” Here we see a deliberation on the boundaries and norms within this religious community regarding female dress codes. In other words, it is through the female body that the community is saved or damned.

For the writers of Aish and Chabad, the issue of modesty is framed around the individual, less than the community. Furthermore, both Aish and Chabad tie modesty with concepts such as dignity and respect. For example, in the Chabad explanation of modesty, it is considered a “staple of Jewish life” and it is explained that, “the basic idea – for both men and women – is to wear self-respecting clothing” (Chabad, 2017d). The reason to be modest, according to the article, is that, “When we refrain from calling undue attention to our external selves, our human core, the G-dly spirit within each one of us, can shine through...” (Chabad, 2017d). Similarly, in the Aish article “Dating with Dignity,” the author assures her readers that “a real, lasting relationship [is] built on the foundation of respect...” (Teichman, 2016). But the coding of modesty and sexuality into concepts such as “respect” and “dignity” is apparent, at least to some of the users commenting on these articles. For example, following assurance that the Aish article is

“excellent” one user cries out, “why don't you mention that respect also means NO Touching” (Teichman, 2016, comment #8), and another user gives additional dating advice, such as, “Maintain appropriate boundaries if you are a man” (Teichman, 2016, comment #3). In the reactions to the Chabad article on modesty, users quickly connect “respect” with “sexuality” as in this comment: “So ladies, please help me and other men not to lust, by not putting temptation in [our] path. Let us admire and be attracted to ‘you’ and not your bodies” (Chabad, 2017d). While this comment is written by a male, some of the females commenting also see immodest dress as a way to sexualize them: “I have never worn shorts or short skirts. It makes me feel very exposed. I don’t like the way some men think of women as objects” (Chabad, 2017d). Most of the users commenting on this Chabad article are interested in sharing advice, such as which garment is considered modest, how to cover one’s hair, and how to deal with dressing modestly in hot weather. The practical tone of the article, which gives specific restrictions and instructions for modest wear, is reflected in the comment section. However, some users object these ideas of modesty and point to the inherent sexualization and regulation of women underscored in this concept of modesty, for example: “And for men? I’m confused as to why this article suggests that modesty is fitting ‘for both men and women’ then gives three practical suggestions that focus only on women.” Or, “Modest dress? Horrid...too much time spent by men on regulating and watching women...” (Chabad, 2017d). These comments and articles touch on one of the sensitive topics concerning modesty: what is the meaning of modesty? Is it about regulation of female bodies and sexuality, a spiritual practice, or a communal practice of

identity? The users mentioned above understand modesty as the regulation of women, in spite of the texts' discussion of respect and self-respect.

The negotiation of the meaning of modesty is found even more explicitly in other articles, such as the Chabad article "Do Women Have Something To Hide?" (Moss, n.d.). This article is structured as a Q&A, and the question is about modesty, or more specifically, "Why does Judaism tell women to keep their bodies covered? Is there something shameful or evil about a woman's body? If men can't control their urges, then it's their problem, not women's" (Moss, n.d.). The answer is a roundabout way of supporting modesty by framing it as an act self-respect and spiritual growth:

You are assuming that the only reason for modest dress is to avoid temptation. While this may be the case in other religions, for Judaism this is not true. **The Jewish way of modest dress is not merely about how other people view women, but more about how women view themselves.** [...] The body is the holy creation of G-d [...] The way we maintain our respect for the body is by keeping it covered. **Not because it is shameful, but because it is so beautiful and precious.** [...] This is true for men's bodies too, and laws of modest dress apply to them as well. But it is even more so for women. The feminine body has a beauty and a power that far surpasses the masculine. **The Kabbalists teach that a woman's body has a deeper beauty because her soul comes from a higher place. For this reason, her body must be kept discreetly covered.**" (Moss, n.d., emphasis mine)

In other words, the author, Aron Moss, explains that modesty has nothing to do with sexuality, but is tied to spirituality. The more sacred or holy something is, the more we should keep it sacred by hiding and covering it. Women, being more spiritually inclined than men, are holier, and thus need to be more covered and modest. Here, traditional sexual norms of limiting and controlling females' bodies is imbued with spiritual meaning. Thus, one does not dress and act modestly to adhere to the patriarchy, but for



one's own spiritual growth. That is, modesty receives a new meaning in these articles – as a path for spiritual development. This discursive strategy frames traditional communal roles and regulations as acts that are individualistic and spiritually-fulfilling. The practices might be old, the spiritual meaning is relatively new, and it is negotiated online in these articles and in the comment sections. While many users embrace and promote this spiritual meaning, others reject it for either feminist reasons (such as the comments above) or religious reasons, such as viewing adherence to *Halacha* and tradition as more important than spiritual or personal reasons.

The above-mentioned articles present women as inherently spiritual and sacred, as souls that “come from a higher place,” and modesty as a way to show respect, self-respect, and protect females' holiness. This attitude can be seen in other articles. For example, in the article “Restrictions That Free” (Bacharach, n.d.), author Dina Bacharach explains modesty as a way for her to grow as a person and to feel liberated. She writes:

Let's take wearing long sleeves, high collars and skirts for example. **It seems so restricting. But I feel so free.** I can walk down the streets and not have to be concerned that guys might have inappropriate thoughts about me. I am protecting myself so that **I can be my deepest, truest self** [...] What may look like a restriction is really freeing me. (Bacharach, n.d., my emphasis)

While Bacharach does tie modesty to sexuality and sees it as a form of protection (“guys might have inappropriate thoughts”), she experiences modest dress and religious sexual norms as liberating, helping her be her “truest self.” Here again, the concept of modesty is tied to spirituality and to empowering women to “be themselves.” Her readers seem to, by and large, agree. Users wrote back leaving comments like “Tzniut [modesty]

empowers us” (Bacharach, n.d.) and that the article is “inspiring.” In fact, the word free/freedom is the most common word in the text, being repeated n=21 times in the article and comments. That is to say, in these online texts, traditional sex and gender norms are reframed and renegotiated to have spiritual meaning, as well as the meaning of liberation and empowerment.

Not all the articles in this sample present gender and sexual norms in such a positive light. In a taboo-breaking act, the Kipa website, in association with Yahel Center, created an online video series speaking explicitly about intimacy and challenging existing sexual norms in the Orthodox community. The Yahel Center is a unique organization seeking to address issues of sexuality in the Orthodox Jewish community. Established in 2012, the organization has worked over the last five years to spread awareness and become a source of knowledge about religious sexuality. They offer lectures, courses, personal counseling, and seminars. According to their website:

Yahel Center was established in order to address intimacy and sexuality openly within the orthodox community. We believe that a positive relationship between a married couple strengthens each partner and holds the foundation for a healthy family. [...] Our goal is to educate and provide couples and professionals with information and insight to a life of healthy intimacy with a Torah perspective. (Merkaz Yahel, 2017)

In August of 2016, during the writing of this dissertation, the Yahel Center sought to address their audience via the most popular website for National Religious Jews in Israel, Kipa. So far five videos have been posted and the reactions are mixed. Even before the actual videos were posted, users seemed to generally resist this series and to take a stand against it. An article announcing the launch of the series was posted in August 25, 2016, and had n=17 comments, which is relatively high response rate for the

Kipa articles sampled (the highest is n=20 comments). Out of these seventeen comments, fourteen are resisting the series. The article is, in many ways, a promotional article for the Yahel Center and the video series:

Yahel Center receives every week many tens of applications by couples in need of guidance. Most of these couples do not have a sexual problem. They do not need therapy. They need directing, some information, a bit of mediation and they are good to go! [...] there is no magic here, just words, listening and a lot of knowledge collected from hundreds of couples that already told their personal story. A story that has already became public, but in our community it continues to remain private, sealed between the couple [...] A story that is not spoken but becomes more exposed in the last few years. The need is clear [...] We need to fix the wrongdoing that had led to a gap between us and our bodies. Us and our partners. Us and a healthy and realistic Jewish approach to intimacy [...] On the one hand, we want to leave intimacy in its natural and healthy place – between the couple. On the other hand, we have a sacred duty to speak, to create an open channel that will give room and legitimacy [...]. For this reason, we are happy to present this video series project made in collaboration with Kipa and with a lot of love. We need to talk, but modestly, goodly, in a clear but clean and kind language, in love.” (Prince, 2016)

This introduction presents the rationale for the video series: the Orthodox society needs to be able to discuss intimacy in a “clean” way. The article also mentions the results of making sexuality a taboo issue – the proliferation of sexual assault and the lack of “healthy” (heterosexual) intimacy between married couples. The way to help people arrive at these positive sexual norms, according to the Yahel Center, is through sexual education and couples’ mediation – both of which can be done “in the spirit of the Torah.” Users immediately voice their concerns – on the first day this article was published, it received seven comments – about this open attitude to sexuality. For many of the users vocalizing their resistance, the main problem is that youth [boys] will be exposed to this content. For example: “Modesty means not to speak or publish videos in

public... there are kids and boys in this website... I'm shocked" (Prince, 2016, comment #1). Or, "sex sex sex sex and only sex. Are you not tired of speaking about sex? And in public? There are kids who read here too!!!" (Prince, 2016, comment #10). Or, "Not everything should be in a website open to all. I'm surprised that *Internet Rimon* [a religious internet filter] allows this content to appear..." (Prince, 2016, comment #15). As will be seen also in the reactions to the other videos, users feel disappointed that a religious website publishes such content and that these taboo issues are allowed/filtered through the religious internet filtering service. Another way to voice this concern is by comparing Kipa to secular online news outlets:

Did you become YNET? What's up with the Kipa website? Some things are better left taboo! Are you a website for this sector [Orthodox society] or do you want to destroy the little piece of modest content that's left? What would you not do for money? For publicity? Too bad!!! Shelve this idea!!! And keep it classy!!! (Prince, 2016, comment #15)

While the majority of the users reacting resistantly in these ways, the users who support this effort are quick to answer the other users' concerns: "Bless you [to the author].

Better late than never... the issue is important and necessary, this content is available throughout the web and its best that the children are exposed to it in a clean language in with modesty in mind. Well done [ישר כוח/ Yasher koach]" (Prince, 2016, comment #13) or:

Bless you. Can help the users of this website that probably for 99% of them the content is appropriate. Which kid surfs in Kipa? (without insulting ☺) and if there is a kid that visits this website then it's better they are exposed to a pure approach to intimacy and not fed only through the rest of the content online ☹ (Prince, 2016, comment #11)

Two issues are debated in these comments: the possibility and importance of discussing intimacy and the public nature of discussing this topic online, on a religious website.

Most of the users resisting are more explicitly concerned with the public aspect, but seem to be implicitly opposing any discussion of sexuality. In this negotiation of sexual norms the tool – the medium of online communication – plays an important part. Yahel Center, as mentioned before, also offers offline services, but they see it as their “sacred duty” to make the topic of “healthy,” “kosher” sexuality publicly discussed. For Yahel Center and the readers that support them, it is exactly the public exposure via digital tools that is important and blessed. For the users who oppose them, the media plays a significant part exactly for the reason that this content should not be accessible to all.

One user exemplifies this perfectly in her response:

I don't usually comment here... but in this case I could not stand silence. As a woman, I think that the discourse about intimate issues is blessed, important, emancipating... I am totally for it! But there are appropriate and inappropriate platforms... It's important for me to say that I'm shocked to see such open talk without any control on who has access to it. Young boys, teenagers... Not at all appropriate! This is a blessed video series for the appropriate audience! But please! Do not publish such a series openly and publicly on your website... (Prince, 2016, comment #2)

For this reader, it is not the **discourse** she is concerned with, but the **online** aspects of it – the fact that it is being talked about online, and as a result anyone (young boys) can have access to this content. Here, the question of how the online is used comes into play. Perhaps, if this was a closed forum, more readers would feel comfortable with it. The online content of the videos is meant to be religiously inclined – to use “clean” language and speak of *Halachic* sexual norms. In this way, the technology of online videos is already cultured for religious needs. However, many of the users feel that this is an improper use of the cultured technology, or feel that the technology was cultured improperly.

Yahel Center and Kipa uploaded all the videos within the same month the above mentioned article appeared, during August 2016. Each video is presented by a different woman, and each one deals with a different aspect of “Jewish sexuality.” The videos are 2-6 minutes long. The reaction to the initial announcement article is higher than the reaction for each individual video (n=16 comments versus an average of five comments for the actual videos). While the reactions dwindle in volume, the strategies and narratives presented in the announcement article carry on in the videos’ articles. The users reacting tend to say something along the lines of “there are kids here” (Stav, 2016, comment #1), or “disgusting” (Yeser-Weinstein, 2016, comment #2). However, overall, the responses to the videos are more positive than those posted to the announcement article. For the announcement article four out of sixteen comments were positive, in which users wrote that they see this discourse as an important one, while twelve commenters strongly resisted. Out of the n=26 total comments on the five videos, twelve were positive and fourteen resisting, totaling in n=46% positive reactions. The videos were also liked via Facebook, which can be read as a sign of support – while the average liking of an article from the Kipa sample is n=43 likes, these videos received on average a little over n=46 likes.

The higher support for the actual videos compared to the announcement article can be explained in various ways. First of all, it is possible that the announcement article might have received more exposure than the actual videos. The videos and announcement article are all posted under the “Women” section, but the article announcing a “new series” on Kipa might have been pushed by the website editors to

promote the series itself. Another possibility is that the announcement article triggered more reactions because it was not examining one specific topic but rather dealing with the meta-question of “should we discuss sexuality in public?” It is also possible that once the videos were posted, users saw they were not as bad as they expected, or maybe they even agreed with some of the content. In any case, the total reaction to the videos was n=61% negative and by the end of August no more videos were posted, although the original five are still available as of May 2017.

The videos are ground-breaking in regards to Orthodox online discussion of sexuality for several reasons. First and foremost, open discussion of sexuality does not exist in any other format within the Jewish online discourse. The videos do not only hint at sexuality, like previous articles discussed, but use clean language to actually describe practices and give advice. In other words, they speak relatively openly about an unspoken, taboo issue in these communities. Secondly, the videos feature women talking about sexuality and *Halacha* – not only having their voices heard, but *de facto* acting as teachers and religious authorities. For some Orthodox communities, this is unthinkable – women should not speak in front of men/study *Torah*/teach in public. Even in those sections of the Orthodox communities in which women do teach, they usually teach “modestly” and only other women – not publicly to all members of society. Having a woman explain, teach, and even speak “in public” (online) about her and others’ sexuality is radical and, to some extent, revolutionary. That being said, the gendered use of this technology is still evident, both in the women’s need to assert authority and in the users’ comments which question that authority.

Figure 16. Tassan Micheali.



While the videos' content is revolutionary in some ways, the women presenting are clear and careful to position their advice/teaching within the *Torah's* spirit. For example, Yehudit Yeser-Weinstein, in her video *It's OK To Laugh* (Yeser-Weinstein, 2016) begins by reading from the Bible the story of Isaac and Rebecca in which Isaac is “playing” with her. Yeser-Weinstein goes on to explain this “play” as a biblical way to discuss intimacy (similar to “knowing”). But “play,” Yeser-Weinstein offers, is less serious than “knowing.” In this way the *Torah* teaches us, says Yeser-Weinstein, to take intimacy humorously and playfully. Furthermore, Isaac, according to Yeser-Weinstein, was the one patriarch that simply loved his wife in a “normal” way (not because she was barren). Therefore, we learn that playful relations are the normal way of “Jewish loving.” Yeser-Weinstein invites both females and males to take sexuality more light-heartedly and to experiment with it – to play with it. She also frames this attitude as what should be the norm.



Figure 17. Ma-Tov



This negotiation of relational norms is evident throughout the videos. Some are trying to create new norms – such as playful intercourse (Yeser-Weinstein, 2016) and speaking about sex after intercourse with your partner (*Talk About It*, Stav, 2016). Others are trying to negotiate existing norms – and even trying to negotiate *Halachic* ruling. Two videos deal directly with *Halachic* issues: *Niddah* (family purity) (Ben-Shitrit, 2016) and the wedding night (Ma-Tov, 2016). The video concerning *Niddah* does not challenge any religious ruling, but it does encourage women to think of themselves first. The day before the ritual washing should be dedicated to rest and relaxation, to prepare the wife for her wash and the intercourse that will follow. More importantly, the speaker, Ella Ben-Shitrit, urges women to be in touch with their bodies and couples to create an environment in which this night will become a re-familiarization with each other's bodies, rather than a stressful night in which intimacy must be achieved. For those women (and men) who experience the night of return to intimacy after two weeks of being separated (during the female's menstruation and seven clean days) as stressful,

Ben-Shitrit offers alternatives such as hugging, going on a date, or simply being together and removing the expectation of intimacy for that night (Ben-Shitrit, 2016).

When it comes to the wedding night, the situation is more complicated.

According to *Halacha*, the couple should try to have intercourse on their first evening – mostly to prevent the groom from masturbation or “spilling his seed.” In one of the most daring videos, Hanna Ma-Tov (Figure 10) asks newlyweds to not force themselves to arrive at penetration. Most religious youth have little to no sexual experience before getting married, due to the custom of *Shmirat Negiaa* (discussed in the previous chapter). As a result, the wedding night becomes a night of “from nothing to all” and for some of the women (and probably some of the men too), this can be traumatic.

Furthermore, because of the rules of family purity, after any bleeding the couple needs to be separate again for at least seven days. This, according to Ma-Tov, can be very difficult emotionally. Ma-Tov approaches this situation with authority and says: “You do not have to ‘do it’ that night. I strongly recommend not to.” She goes on to advocate a different approach:

Sit together... hug, and kiss and get to know each other's body... with no commitment to that moment... you can delay [penetration] for a few more days... so you will have a meaningful, healthy and loving experience and not a trauma... That it should be **from her will**, from her love to arrive at it, for you [male] and for her ... I really stress this and strongly recommend **not to do it that [first] night**... enjoy, a day or two or three... be together and enjoy this game... get to know her body and she will get to know your body and you will arrive at it with pleasure and joy... (Ma-Tov, 2016, my emphasis)

This text is not only explicit by the standards of Kipa website, it is also seemingly against *Halachic* ruling, which the users are quick to point out: “This is against *Halacha*

what you are saying” (Ma-Tov, 2016, comment #1), “This is the opposite of what the *Halacha* says” (Ma-Tov, 2016, comment #2), and simply, “Reforms” (Ma-Tov, 2016, comment #8). A learned *Halachic* discussion then takes place between the users, with one user trying to defend Ma-Tov and this perspective using *Halachic* and religious sources. Other users who endorse this video simply note that it is brave and beautiful advice. One user even goes so far as to dismiss the *Halacha* in face of this woman’s teaching: “Very beautiful. Above and beyond any *Halacha*. Common sense that can save a marriage for years to come” (Ma-Tov, 2016, comment #9). What arises from this video and some of the responses to it is that the issue of penetration and intimacy on the wedding night has been so far dictated by (male) religious ruling, and it is through the work of women like Ma-Tov that this issue is beginning to receive a female perspective. Furthermore, it seems that the *Halachic* approach has caused pain and distance between married partners (see comment #9), a pain that is crystalized and addressed in the last video discussed below and, more generally, in the work of the Yahel Center.

The video titled *Not to be Afraid to Touch* (Tassan-Michaeli, 2016) and presented by Moria Tassan-Michaeli (Figure 9) is the most liked among all the videos (number of Facebook likes: n=76). In the video Tassan-Michaeli describes married women who are afraid of intimacy with their husbands – and try to avoid it, even to avoid hinting at it. She tells a story of a woman that does not call her husband in any endearing names such as “dear,” “sweetheart,” etc., because in their relationship, using an endearment means being available for intercourse. These women in fact feel relaxed and more comfortable in the two weeks in which they are “forbidden” to their husbands (during menstruation)

because there are no “stress” or “expectations.” According to Tassan-Michaeli this is a result of the first intimate encounters that religious couples have. The extreme move from no touch to penetration and sexual touch can create a dissonance and result in distance and defamiliarization with one’s own body, as well as with their partner’s body. Tassan-Michaeli suggests that couples need to differentiate between “loving” touch and “sexual” touch – which can get mixed up because of this “all or nothing” mentality. In cases like these, any touch from one’s husband – hugging, stroking, caressing – will be immediately translated to pressure to arrive at penetration. While recognizing that this is a problem that is created through social norms and cultural enforcement, that is, a sociological/macro phenomenon, Tassan-Michaeli offers couples a solution that is privatized and personalized: change your communication patterns, go to therapy, etc., thus offering a solution at the level of the individual, a psychological resolution instead of a sociological one. That being said, Tassan-Michaeli bravely opens for discussion a topic that is taboo and unspoken for most married couples. Surprisingly, this “scandalous” video receives only one response – and it is positive: “Thank you!! An important issue! From a married woman” (Tassan-Michaeli, 2016, comment #1). Furthermore, this is the second most liked article on Facebook from the entire Kipa sample, indicating that users have found this content acceptable, if not relatable. The fact that Tassan-Michaeli does not challenge *Halacha*, but offers instead solutions at the level of individual therapy, could possibly contribute to the acceptance of this video.

In summary, the analysis highlights two general directions concerning the online discourse on the meaning of sexuality as presented in the above videos and articles. The

first is traditional attitudes towards the female body as a dangerously sexual body (that is, the concept of modesty) being framed positively through spiritual and personal meaning. The second trend is a negotiation of sexual norms and “Jewish intimacy” publicly and openly, via digital tools, in an innovative and ground breaking format. The media of the Internet and these websites, which allow for user reactions, further complicates things as users react and reject – negotiate – both the traditional views and the innovative ones.

*Thematic analysis: Motherhood.* Motherhood, while not an explicit subject of discussion, seems to be woven like a thread throughout many of the articles. Within the sample, articles’ titles and topics tend to be centered on womanhood and marriage, with headlines such as: “Don’t Get Divorced,” “The Role of Women in Judaism,” “A Woman's Place in Torah,” “Men, Women and Forgiveness”, and “Lousy body image” – but these articles hint at or in some way discuss motherhood. Motherhood, as will be highlighted in the following pages, is the goal and “natural” path of womanhood, and as such, it is always already present in discourse about gender and sex. Motherhood as a theme occurs n=51 times throughout the sample, and housework, usually tied to motherhood in these texts, appears n=43 times. As discussed in the introduction of the dissertation, Judaism is a matrilineal ethnicity. (Only Jewish women can give birth to Jewish kids.) While there are no *Halachic* rules concerning how to be a mother, and women are not even commended to have children, motherhood is seen as very important in a woman’s life in traditional Jewish culture (Cantor, 1995). All three websites – Chabad, Kipa, and Aish – seem to encourage and support motherhood and parenting as

important Jewish values, and, as will be seen from the analysis, understand motherhood as a fulfillment of womanhood, to a degree.

Motherhood is generally described in all three websites' articles and many of the comments in a positive light. For example, reacting to the article "Men's Rights" (Braverman, 2006), one user comments, "Jewish men ARE sensitive and loving because the wonderful mothers that have taught them and raised them..." (Braverman, 2006, comment #31). According to most of the article authors, and some of the commenters, motherhood is the highest form of being one can aspire to. For example, the author of the Chabad article "No, I am not satisfied with Women's Status in Judaism" reminds her reader that, "By exempting women from time-bound mitzvot, Torah reminds us that essential to our relationship with Gd is the understanding that building a Jewish family life is a priority that can never be sidestepped" (Weisberg, n.d.). She goes on to explain that this is an important role that has a high value in Jewish life, a role that is uniquely reserved for women:

What I love about Torah Judaism is the central position given to children, who are our future. As a family-based religion, the ideal of raising children is considered most significant. It is a responsibility that is shared by both parents, but Torah realizes the unique talents, techniques and intuition that women bring to the fore. (Weisberg, n.d.)

According to the author, Chana Weisberg, Judaism recognizes and cherishes child bearing and raising. In Judaism, the Family is given a place of respect – it is significant, and mothers are honored for their work. Furthermore, it seems that women are uniquely gifted to be mothers, as they have "talents, techniques and intuition" – hinting at motherhood as a natural, essential element for women. In a different Chabad article, it is

argued that childbearing is what makes females into women: “women [were] born with a womb and the ability to carry and bear a child, and men were not” (Crispe, n.d.). This highlights the ability to bear children as the essence of womanhood, as is crystalized in one of the supportive comments to this article:

G-d breathed into us that role of nurturer not only for our children but our husbands too- this is why a man leaves his family and cleaves to his wife. G-d is reminding his daughters to return to our husbands and take no worry in what the world would see as a move in the opposite direction for feminism; the world is calling us to the workplace but our G-d is calling us home! (Crispe, n.d., comment)

According to this user and the general spirit of these articles, motherhood is given to women by God in order for them to accomplish and live out their inherent nature as nurturers and giving individuals. By sanctifying motherhood and making it holy and God sent, this discourse gives meaning to motherhood that is beyond the communal and practical, it gives motherhood a spiritual meaning. However, not all users view motherhood/mothers as wonderful or spiritually meaningful. Quite a few of the users write about the physical and mental work associated with motherhood. For example, on the topic of respect, which should be given by wives to their husbands, one user resists by making the following argument:

Let me tell you. Men need to respect us women more. We are out working too. Its [sic] not just a man's world. I am a VERY DEDICATED mother to my kids. I drive from sport to sport, watching their games, taking them to their friends [sic] houses, etc. I do it all. I work, too. (Braverman, 2004a, comment #53)

Motherhood in this online discourse is mostly presented in an ideal fashion, although the nitty-gritty aspects of it (such as housework) are also discussed, as in the comment above. The material and psychical aspects – the **work** – associated with motherhood are

commented on by several women, but with different attitudes. Some, like the user above, see it as a reality and a sign of dedication, but one that deserves more respect and appreciation from men. The need for further respect is in comparison to the esteem external practices – like praying in the synagogue – receive in Judaism. In a different article which mocks women’s “constant complaining” about their rights (Crispe, n.d.), the author suggests that if women were obliged to go to the synagogue, they would complain about that too. A discussion then takes place in the comment section about women’s commitment to prayer – private or in the synagogue (or in a *minyan*). One of the users then asks:

Yes, times have changed since then, but women still do the lion share of household chores and child-rearing. Even if women were allowed to participate in a minyan, how many would actually do so? Most of us struggle to get our kids to school on time, go to work, cook dinner, and do a myriad of other things until bedtime. So where does this really leave women? Still somewhat underappreciated, because it's not about having the time to pray, but about counting as much as a man. (Crispe, n.d.)

That is, this user suggests that women still do most of the work associated with parenting, and their work both denies them religious leadership and participation and is underappreciated. According to the user, in Orthodox Judaism women “do not count as much as men.” The underappreciation of motherhood these users describe tells a different story than the “official” narrative offered by the authors of the articles in this online discourse. There seems to be a contradiction between articles, in which motherhood receives many praises, and these comments, which describe the burden of motherhood (driving children, housework, etc.) and especially how motherhood is not appreciated. It is more than likely, however, that while the articles might represent some



ideal position, in reality many Jewish mothers are probably not well respected by their husbands, children, or community. That is, the position of motherhood many times becomes “natural,” “hidden,” or simply taken for granted. At the same time, religious obligations such as studying *Torah* and going to the synagogue – traditionally done by men and not women – are seen as holy commitments, actions for which one receives honor from both the community and God.

Many of the users reacting to the above-mentioned articles also ask about the value of women who are not mothers – by choice or not by choice. In an article titled “A Feminist Quest for a Place in Jewish Life” the author Donna Halper remembers her correspondence with the Chabad Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (Halper, n.d.). She reached out to him many years ago. Even though she was not Orthodox she sought his advice about the place for a feminist, childless woman in Judaism. He sent her a letter back, and now, years after, she recalls this correspondence: “He understood that I was seeking some guidance as to what *mitzvah* a childless woman is supposed to perform, and I thought that his response was both beautifully expressed and very, very compassionate: There is a role for every woman, whether a mother or not, in Judaism” (Halper, n.d.). While the Rebbe’s answer does seem to indicate acceptance of childless women (Chabad, 2017e), he does not, in his letter, specify any *mitzvah* they should perform. This is noted by some of the users, who ask and comment:

So what were the *Mitzvahs* that childless women could do? Teach? Influence? So they have no family, children, or grandchildren. Then again they are to teach others children and influence them? Seems barren to me. Shabbot without a family, isn’t shabbot. No family to be with or get ready by sundown? So to me life within orthodoxy for the childless is still very hard. (Halper, n.d.)

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Oy vey!! In this article, the author's attitude and the Rebbe's letter, as well as in the comments, there is completely missing ANY understanding of the deep, devastating pain the infertile woman feels!! I was not moved by this article as I have nothing in common with this author - she was untouched by being childless [...] My experience has been that the Orthodox community simply has no familiarity with or understanding of infertility. So disappointing. You are leaving a whole group of women (and men) without any spiritual comfort or guidance. (Halper, n.d.)

Both these users, along with other commenters, feel that for them, it is very hard to be a woman who is not a mother – for whatever reason – in the Orthodox community. It is not only a question of your religious belonging (which *mitzvah* they should preform) but more of a concern for the daily life which, in Jewish communities, centers around the family. For an infertile woman who wants to have children, like the second user cited above, this can be a devastating experience as your personal pain is overlooked and made worse by a child-focused society. As the user highlights, “the Orthodox community simply has no familiarity with or understanding of infertility.” And, regardless of your ability to have children or not, it is life without family in a family-oriented world, as the first user points out, so no matter how many other children you teach, as a woman (and probably a man too), to have no children of your own, no family, makes life in the Orthodox community very difficult. These experiences of the Orthodox community not being a welcoming place for childless women are echoed in other articles in Chabad, Aish, and Kipa. For example, Kipa published an article on a few religious couples who choose not to have children. This was presented as shocking and abnormal, and many of the users reacting to the article state this: “You’ve taken two bizarre girls... and made it into a phenomenon” (Yerchi, 2015, comment #4). Other users vocally

disregard them, for example: “Every Jewish person has a duty to have children” (Yerchi, 2015, comment #3), and “This is unhealthy behavior” (Yerchi, 2015, comment #5).

While four users’ comments do seem to accept this position of not having children, the other n=23 comments strongly resist.

Reflection on the choice to not have children is mostly focused on women. These women are seen as opposing their supposed role of motherhood, and thus losing the meaning of their womanhood. This strong association between woman and mother is challenging for childless women but also for women who see themselves as more than mothers. For example, this user asks in reaction to the article “The Role of Women in Judaism:”

Subject: No Meaning

I was interested to see that it is not *halachically* required for a woman to marry or have children. **This article has nothing to say to such women, since it defines womanhood strictly in relation to marriage and children.** Furthermore, for those women who do choose to marry and have children, childbearing, child-rearing and menstruation take up less than half of a woman’s life. **The article identifies no religious meaning for the other 40 years?** (Crispe, n.d, my emphasis)

This question about meaning outside of motherhood is brought up in other users’ comments, for example: “I think it is time for the Chassidic world to recognize that women are in this world not just to have babies and raise families” (Slonim, n.d.). Furthermore, these women are actively asking and seeking meaning that is outside motherhood:

Maybe all who read this post will disagree! but, there are some jewish [sic] women who may not feel like they are mentally, emotionally or physically capable of having children. What about the passion to learn torah[sic], that these women have, why can't this chassid [sic] community foster that, It hurts to want to be more observant and find that the only

way I can join a jewish [sic] community is not by studying torah[sic], but by having babies. (Slonim, n.d.)

There seems to be a gap between what these users describe as their experiences – both as mothers and as non-mothers – and the way motherhood is portrayed in the articles.

Article authors suggest that motherhood is holy and has a spiritual meaning and that at the same time, Jewish women who are not mothers also have a role to play in the shaping of the community. However, the users tell a different story: They feel that motherhood is underappreciated and that non-mothers have no “home” nor role to play in these communities.

In summation, it seems that motherhood plays a pivotal role in defining womanhood. The role of motherhood goes hand in hand with the understanding of woman as internal and giving, a nurturing creature in her essence. Motherhood is not only expected of women, but is redefined in this online discourse as meaningfully spiritual – a “‘call from G-d’ to ‘return home,’” as one of the users comments. However, the interactive aspect of the digital plays a part in the negotiation of motherhood, as women throughout these texts challenge both the way mothers are treated and the association between motherhood and womanhood. As one of the users points out, “being a mother is not all that I was, I am more than a mother, more than my career, more than my hobbies, I am a collection of all those things, including daughter and friend” (Weisberg, n.d.).

## Summary

This chapter analyzes the construction and negotiation of gender and sexuality's meaning in this Orthodox digital discourse and highlights the strategies used to promote and resist a traditional framework of gender and sexual norms. The analysis presented in this chapter was conducted using the tri-layered critical discourse analysis model, focusing on: 1) technological affordances, 2) religious cultural context, and 3) discursive strategies. The key findings highlighted in this chapter point to a discourse of meaning that seeks personal, spiritual, or identity laden meaning for gender and sexual concepts.

By and large, traditional Orthodox understanding of gender and sexuality are presented and strengthened in this discourse, but with a focus on the individual rather than the *Halachic* or communal meaning of these norms. For example, gender is generally understood in the articles and comments analyzed in this chapter as essential and binary: males are men and females are women, men are external and women are internal, etc. Women's bodies are considered holy and need to be covered, and men are lustful and need women to behave modestly in order to avoid temptation. That being said, the internal nature of women is the path of self-actualization and modesty is "empowering." In other words, the meaning ascribed to gender and sexual norms in this digital discourse is that of a subjective understanding of one's "true" self.

The examination of the technological affordances shows this discourse as a participatory one, and highlights the various ways negotiation can happen in the digital discourse: through explicit support or resistance, in the article or comment section, and

through implicit support enabled by sharing or liking on social media. For example, the video *Not to be Afraid to Touch*, which negotiates sexual norms within the Orthodox community, received only one comment, but was the most liked article from the Kipa sample. In this way, the affordances of sharing and liking work as a normalizing factor in this discourse, a way in which users can express their (relative) support to an article or opinion. All three websites – Chabad, Aish, and Kipa – allow for and encourage, to some degree, commenting, sharing, or liking, and in this way they create a discourse which is relatively interactive and participatory.

The religious cultural context employed in this discourse was also explored, following the model of the tri-layered critical discourse analysis. Here, the religious cultural context focused on the cultural artifacts, texts, and ideologies that inform the discourse. That is, references to religious texts, terminologies, concepts, and worldviews – for example, discussing the Messiah or the meaning of *eizer kenegdo*. It was noted that while the discourse of meaning presents theological understandings of gender and sexuality (for example, feminism as a sign of messianic days), it is also supported by secular/modern/therapeutic language (as in the example of Mann’s article, which referred to psychologists instead of rabbinical writing). These findings suggest that gender and sexuality are generally constructed by using spiritual and theological language. However, many of the religious terms, such as, for example “*Torah*” or “Reform Judaism” are regarded through a simplistic and monosemic approach in this online discourse. Lastly, it was observed that the religious language and worldview was

accompanied by or even seen through a neoliberal perspective that seeks to provide meaning through the self rather than through the community, nation, or tradition.

Lastly, the analysis of the discursive strategies highlights the various ways in which users and authors either established or resisted traditional gender and sexual norms and their meaning. These include the following discursive strategies: 1) using personal experience, 2) othering the opinion/author, 3) avoiding or silencing practical/oppressive elements, 4) framing social patriarchal structures as an issue of personal choice and joy, 5) ascribing empowering and spiritual meaning to traditional gender norms, 6) describing gender roles as “true” subjective selves, 7) protecting communal boundaries and sacredness, and 8) using modern terms in a traditional/spiritual meaning. A short explanation of each of these strategies is necessary to better understand the general negotiation in the Orthodox digital discourse.

Using personal experience, meaning users sharing their stories or explaining gender based on specific personal events or subjective feelings, can be traced in several of the online discussions. For example, women resist the “ideal” form of motherhood presented in some of the articles by expressing their own struggles either as a mother or a non-mother. In this way, the private becomes political and a tool for resistance. At the same time, the personal voice was also used to empower and enforce traditional religious gender norms, as in the article “Restrictions That Free” (Bacharach, n.d.), where the author tells about the feeling of liberation she derives from *Halachic* restrictions.

Othering the opinion/author takes place when users or authors present an opinion/person as “not-Jewish” or “not-Orthodox,” thus delegitimizing that

opinion/person. For example, when Adler presents a religious-feminist perspective, arguing for example, for letting women have leadership roles in the synagogue, users protect the (hegemonic) Orthodox power structure that does not allow for feminism by calling her out as a Reform. When discussing modesty, one of the authors in Chabad claims that it is not Jewish to associate sexuality with modesty – thus othering an unwanted opinion. Or, users in Kipa who are resisting strict modesty codes call users who defend modesty “ultra-Orthodox” and “crazy.”

Avoiding or silencing practical/oppressive elements is also a popular strategy, especially for maintaining traditional power. For instance, in an Aish article, the author (Heller) discusses what women are mentally inclined to do (pray at home), but not what they *Halachically* cannot do (lead a synagogue service). Similarly, throughout this sample, the joy of domestic and “internal” duties is described, while the fact that in Orthodoxy women cannot, or are discouraged from, taking on external positions and roles is many times ignored.

Another strategy that helps support traditional power structure is by framing social patriarchal structures as an issue of personal choice and joy. For example, the Chabad author Slonim expresses joy in being a female and accepting her feminine roles. Another user commenting on this article says, “[we should] accept our roles as women, wives, and mothers with all the joy and glory G-d has intended for us [...]” – thus encouraging readers to understand patriarchal power structures as divinely inspired and a source of joy.



Similarly, many authors and users support traditional gender norms by ascribing empowering and spiritual meaning to them. Author Sara Esther Crispe, for example, claims that women “shine forth and reveal our true power” when they maximize their internal tendencies, support their husbands, and stay domestic. Another example is in the discussion of modesty, in which one author claims that women’s bodies should be more strictly covered because they are holier (than men). By positioning women as inherently more spiritual, they become benevolent goddesses who are empowered by staying covered and nurturing others.

Another discursive strategy employed by authors and users is to describe “correct” gender behavior as a way of discovering one’s “true” subjective self. For example, author Bacharach explains how the rules of modesty help her be her “truest self” (Bacharach, n.d.). This type of framing is aligned with the “positive” and “empowering” spin on traditional gender norms described in the discursive strategies above. Many of the articles in this sample stress how traditional gender roles will help users understand who they really are and be true to that self (omitting the practical and *Halachic* rights and responsibilities that are given to each gender and the lack of mobility between those rights).

Protecting communal boundaries and sacredness is another strategy that is similar to silencing/avoiding – this strategy is when users/authors declare what material/topics are legitimate for discussion within the limits of these specific websites. For example, trying to minimize or ban discussion on sexual issues, many of the users objecting the Yahel Center videos did so to protect young boys from what they consider

“improper” material. Other articles and comments want to create a Jewish community that is sacred, spiritual, free of temptations, and which upholds “family values.”

Feminism and liberalism, to some extent, are seen as outside means that can destroy marriages and the Jewish community, and thus Orthodox writers and users in this discourse protect against it.

Lastly, many users and authors use modern terms in a traditional meaning – in ways that distort and make the traditional (oppressive) norm seem less problematic. For example, on both Chabad and Aish, modesty becomes synonymous with concepts such as “dignity” and “self-respect.” Or, in a Kipa article about household management, author Lavi employs the concept of partnership in marriage to maintain traditional division of labor, approximating career (what the men do) with household care (what women do) as they are both equal aspects of “helping at home.”

Through these discursive strategies and the digital and religious elements of the discourse, we see how the meaning of gender and sexual norms is constructed and negotiated in this online discourse. By and large, most of the authors and users accept and promote a traditional, binary, patriarchal meaning of gender and sex. They work through different modes and strategies to explain this position and negotiate modernity (liberalism/feminism) with a traditional Orthodox religion. They do so by either negating or negotiating feminism, and by constructing their position in terms of subjective identity, female empowerment, spiritual meaning, and personal joy.

**CHAPTER VI**  
**CONCLUSIONS – HOLY WOMEN, PIOUS SEX, AND A SANCTIFIED**  
**INTERNET REVEALED THROUGH DIGITAL JEWISH ORTHODOX**  
**DISCOURSE**

This dissertation explores the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed and negotiated in online Jewish Orthodox discourse. Through this I highlight the ways in which religious gender and sexual behaviors are normalized and/or problematized through online tools. Seeking to expose the ways in which gender and sexual norms are created and maintained is a difficult task, as these behaviors are constantly and subtly corrected and reinforced. However, through emerging media, digital communication creates a new and participatory space in which, it is claimed, users can playfully experiment with gender and sexual identities, and religious/traditional hierarchies can shift (Jenkins, 2006; Theobald, 2012; Haraway, 1991). In this dissertation project I want to examine the ways these new digital tools are used by Orthodox Jews, who tend to have traditional understandings of gender and sexuality, but are currently negotiating modern notions of sexual liberation and the feminist revolution. From this exploration, I am able to offer insight into the usage of digital tools by religious individuals for the negotiation of gender and sex, as well as demonstrate more broadly the ways in which gender and sexual behaviors are normalized online.

In order to examine Orthodox Jewish negotiation online, three popular websites were chosen to represent a digital Jewish Orthodox discourse: Chabad.org, Aish.com,

and Kipa.co.il. My investigation of this material, reveals how digital communication functions as a Foucauldian discourse, a “site of struggle,” in which both power and resistance take place, as argued in the literature review and method chapters. That is, the normalizing process happens through the discourse – the constant and indirect, elusive ways in which people talk and act regarding gender and sexuality. Online communication gives us as researchers and users a unique access to this discourse, as it is archived and accessible to all. Once the conversations, journals, questions and answers, articles, and literature of a community or worldview are “fossilized” online, I argue, we as researchers can decode and analyze them. In the case of this dissertation, I examine the worldviews of Orthodox Jews who embrace digital technology, and use it, perhaps unknowingly, to construct, maintain, and negotiate communal norms. I specifically focus on the construction and negotiation of gender and sexual norms as they are presented and discussed in this Orthodox digital discourse. Furthermore, in this discourse, I argue, we must consider not only the ways in which users talk (the discursive/linguistic components), but also the religious worldviews that inform them, and the technological affordances that enable the discourse. To that end, I develop a tri-layered critical discourse analysis model in order to highlight three elements that constitute this discourse. The model suggests an analysis of 1) technological affordance, 2) religious cultural context, and 3) discursive strategies.

This conclusion chapter details the key findings from the analysis, highlighting the ways gender and sexual norms are negotiated in the Orthodox digital discourse examined. This chapter also addresses how these findings help answer the research

question set out in this dissertation. This leads to reflections on the contributions of both the analysis model and the thesis findings. The chapter concludes by suggesting future research directions.

### **Summary of Key Findings: The Construction and Negotiation of Gender/Sex**

The analysis of the Orthodox discourse examined in this dissertation was presented in Chapters IV and V, through three layers of analysis. I present my findings following the order of analysis. I first briefly review the key findings from each chapter, then detail the key takeaways on each level of analysis. Finally, I discuss what is gained when the three layers are put together to reveal the ways gender and sexuality are negotiated and constructed in this online Orthodox discourse. The two content chapters examine discourse related to practice (Halachic rules) and meaning (narratives and explanations for these). While practice and meaning are hard to detach from one another, this division was found useful in order to examine the different aspects of religious negotiation: negotiation of rules in the first chapter and negotiation of denotations of these rules in the second chapter. The first content analysis chapter examines the Discourse of Practice, which is negotiated through *Halachic* discussion. Online, this happens in “ask-the-rabbi” sections, in the asking and answering of *Halachic* questions, through which the legal religious Jewish system is constantly evolving. I look specifically at issues of sexual and gender practices, and choose to focus on the practices of *Shmirat Negiaa* (not touching the other sex) and masturbation. Through examining

n=60 Questions & Answers and n=81 comments from the three Orthodox websites I've highlighted how a strict approach to religious practices is preferred both by the rabbis and by the askers. While some of the users asking questions or commenting do so in ways that seem to resist, a high majority of both users asking questions and users commenting are supportive of the rabbis' positions or enforce an even more strict observance than the rabbis' answers. In my second content chapter, I've examined n=48 articles and n=1103 comments written on the three religious Jewish websites, in which the meaning of gender and sexual religious norms was discussed. My findings highlight the fact that in these articles as well as in the Q&A, a traditional approach to gender and sexuality was preferred and maintained not only by the authors but also by the commenters and the users in general. What was also highlighted were the various discursive strategies that the authors and the users in these websites took. For example, recommending users who had trouble maintaining the Orthodox gender/sex ideals seek professional therapy is a strategy that allowed downplaying the need for changes at the social-cultural level. Another strategy was to frame traditional gender roles as spiritually meaningful. This strategy reframed oppressive religious structures as structures that liberate and free women and men. Words like "joy" and "empower" were constantly used to describe these oppressive structures from the female perspective, thus minimalizing the need for resistance. Users' subjectivities are constructed to understand traditional religious gender roles as empowering and as a path for self-improvement. Users are thus encouraged to regulate themselves and others. Theorized as a form of governmentality, this online discourse operates on religious individuals in such a way

that they are “ruled, mastered, held in check, administered, steered, guided, by means of which they are led by others or have come to direct or regulate their own actions” (Rose, 1992, p. 143). The analysis provided in this dissertation suggests that the Orthodox online discourse strengthens existing religious patriarchal structures of power by offloading them to the users and framing them in the language of meaning and destiny. Thus, religious power is maintained through a discourse that helps “govern from a distance” (Rose, 1992) by aligning users’ desire for ‘self-improvement’ and ‘self-empowerment’ with the solutions provided by teaching and comments enforcing traditional gender and sexual norms. What follows is a more detailed account of the findings at the level of each layer of the tri-layer critical discourse analysis model, focusing on: 1) technological affordance, 2) religious cultural context, and 3) discursive strategies (see Figure 4 in chapter III).

***Technological affordances as peer regulation.*** In both analysis chapters, the first layer of the analysis examined the technological affordances, media logics, and the designs of the websites themselves. One of the key findings the analysis of technological affordances made clear is that these websites – Chabad.org, Aish.com, and Kipa.co.il – are interested in enabling interactions. All three websites have sharing and commenting abilities, although these play out in different ways. For example, Aish permits commenting on general articles but does not offer this ability in the ask-the-rabbi section. Kipa allows for sharing and “liking” but only through Facebook, and not on any other social media platform. Chabad and Aish, by comparison, allow sharing on many more social media sites, using an “add this” button that gives the user the option to share

an article or webpage through multiple social media platforms. While these differences are in themselves worthy of research, the important underlying notion emphasized in this dissertation is that these Orthodox websites allow and encourage a participatory discourse.

This is significant when considering religious discourse and power, because it means lay people have constant access to religious sources and religious leaders, thus making religious debates and conversation accessible to people who traditionally were left out, like women, uneducated men, or non-Jews. Pre-internet Orthodox religious communication, especially theological and *Halachic* communication, has been traditionally controlled by the “religious elite” – educated men who took on religious authority roles, such as a rabbi or community leader (Gottesman, 2009). With the advent of mass communication and digital communication, Orthodox theological and *Halachic* discussions became more widespread and accessible (Pitkowsky, 2011). Some rabbis and Orthodox leaders view this as a challenge to their authority and try to ban or minimize internet usage in their communities. Other Orthodox communities, perhaps ones that would be considered more embracing of modern values, accepted the Internet early on. These communities, which are the focus of this dissertation, still have a variety of choices in how they manage their digital communication. As highlighted by Golan and Campbell (2015), at least three website management strategies can be noted within the Orthodox world: control (intense regulation of both content and users), layering (creating different layers with the website with varying regulation), and guiding (very moderate regulation by the website editors). That is, these website designers and editors



could have chosen a stricter approach to participation, one that did not allow for feedback and, in that way, disabled verbal resistance (“talkback”). Indeed, the fact the Aish does not allow comments about the rabbis’ answers could fall under the control strategy suggested by Golan and Campbell. Still, most of the communication options on these websites, judging by the websites’ designs and affordances, seem to take a “guiding” or “lenient” strategy, allowing disagreements and encouraging discussion and participation. The findings from my sample suggest that even sensitive or “off-limits” issues, like masturbation, female sexuality, or divorce, are discussed in these mainstream online religious spaces. That is, the technological affordances expand the discourse, so that what was once taboo, to be discussed not only in closed forums (as examined by Theobald, 2012), can also be discussed on websites publicly accessible to all.

However, the interactive, participatory affordances of the websites have not necessarily led to a proliferation of opinions on the topic of gender and sexuality, as shown in the analysis. As suggested by feminist scholars of technology, the use of these technologies was framed through an existing gendered worldview (Balsamo, 1992). For example, both in the Q&A and in the general articles, the comment sections were mostly used to support traditional or strict religious interpretations of *Halacha* and the *Torah*. Users’ reactions to the rabbis’ answers in the Q&A sections were overwhelmingly supportive of a strict approach to sexuality, as the majority of comments were in some way supportive of the rabbinical position (about n=80%). Aside from strengthening the rabbis’ authority, users also utilized the comment section to enforce and regulate each other, by shaming or correcting users who resisted. In summary, the analysis of the

technological features and affordances emphasizes that these affordances enable a discourse that is participatory and interactive. This means that the construction of gender and sexuality in these online religious websites is not simply a top-down process led by religious authority. Rather, the technological features suggest a discourse that is maintained by authors and users together – not an authoritative attempt to define gender and sexuality by rabbis, but a more mutual and public creation of knowledge and norms. And indeed, as was highlighted in both the analysis of this layer and in the discursive strategies, the comment sections in all three websites operated as a tool for peer regulation and correction, thus maintaining traditional religious gender and sexual norms.

***Religious cultural context in modern times.*** The second layer of the analysis focused on religious language and terminology – what role do religious canonic texts (such as the *Torah* and *Halachic* texts), religious terms (such as religious denomination, for example), and more generally, religious theology (such as messianic times or holiness) play in this discourse? What was noted in both analysis chapters was the monosemic use of religious terms, alongside the addition of modern terms and online sources. Because in Judaism religious language includes both theology and praxis, it was of special interest to examine how *Halachic* language plays out in this digital discourse. One of the key findings of the first analysis chapter revealed the minimal use of *Halachic* language to support “legal” rulings. This finding supports previous research on Jewish online Q&A (Nachtstern, 2008; Gottesman, 2009; Steinitz, 2011), which argued that online Q&A are different from traditional Jewish Q&A, tend to be shorter and not

supported by *Halachic* texts, and overall ascribe to the logics of the Internet and not the logics of traditional *Halachic* Q&A. Alongside the minimal use of *Halachic* language, it was found that material in both chapters included modern and online sources supporting or complementing the religious language, for example, using the concept of “sexual harassment” as a reason to maintain religious abstinence (*Shmirat Negiaa*). This means that one of the ways traditional gender and sexual behaviors are normalized is by using secular or “common-sense” arguments. It also means that to some extent, the religious reasons and motivations themselves are not strong/convincing enough to maintain these norms, thus hinting at a religious worldview that combines religious culture with general, secular/western/modern culture. At the same time, it is worth noting that religious worldviews were at times used to explain modern values, especially in the second analysis chapter. For example, some Chabad authors and users talked about the feminist movement as a sign of messianic days. Furthermore, in the second analysis chapter, which dealt with the meaning of gender and sexual norms, theology and spirituality were constantly used to explain gender roles. For example, it was argued by the websites’ authors and users that women are more spiritually inclined, that their spirituality and “true self” are internal, and that they derive divine joy through nurturing and giving. These findings point to a use of religious cultural context focused on personal empowerment. That is, the religious language and worldview were presented through a neoliberal perspective – providing meaning through self-empowerment and choice, rather than through commitment to the divine or to the tradition. In other words, analyzing the religious cultural context in the sample of both chapters highlighted a

simplistic and self-centered use of religious language, one that supports a neoliberal understanding of gender and sexual norms.

*Discursive strategies for resistance and power.* The last layer of the analysis explores, in light of the two other layers, the discursive strategies themselves. Here, a variety of ways for negotiating and constructing gender and sexuality can be noted. While the analysis does not exhaust all the ways power and resistance operated, it does try to point out and define the processes of constructing gender and sexual norms in online Orthodox discourse. Both analysis chapters pointed to similar discursive strategies, and thus the following subsection will detail all the discursive strategies highlighted throughout this dissertation:

1) Use of the personal voice – utilizing personal experiences and stories to either explain or negotiate religious norms, making the private a tool to negotiate the social. This strategy was apparent in both the Q&A material and the articles: when users asked questions about their specific situations, or when authors related their personal stories to their main argument, or when commenters supported or resisted an article based on their personal experience. Highlighting this strategy is significant for showing how the personal becomes political in this negotiation. At the same time, using personal experience keeps the problem at the level of the individual, and protects the religious systems from needing to change. It also adds to the overall self-focused, neoliberal approach underlining this discourse.

2) Framing behaviors as sins – By already considering a certain behavior as problematic and sinful, users self-regulate and authors normalize a strict approach towards gender/sexuality. This was shown especially in the Q&A chapter, in which users asking questions framed their own behaviors as sinful – e.g., questions such as, “how do I atone for masturbating?” – thus implicitly suggesting this is a sin. The significance of this strategy is in showing both how some behaviors for the religious users are already internalized as problematic, and in showing the self-regulation that happens online, and that enforces the regulation and correction of other users as well as oneself.

3) Enforcing external or internal regulation – Rabbis, authors, and users, when explicitly coercing behavior, either use external regulation (citing religious sources: you need to do so because God says so) or internal regulation (a softer approach that tends to combine theological, spiritual, scientific, therapeutic, or “common-sense” arguments: you want to do so because it is good for you). A clear example for these approaches is in the Q&A section, in which Aish rabbis and Rabbi Argaman, for example, answer users by saying “God said so” (Argaman, 2015); versus Rabbi Sherlow or Mrs. Shefer, for example, who coerce users into accepting certain behaviors because “it makes sense” or “it makes you holier” (Sherlow, 2015; Askmoses, 2017a). What is shared by these two strategies is the overt enforcement of sexual or gender norms; the difference is in how they expect the users to understand this enforcement.

4) Resisting by utilizing other religious values – While this was not a very popular strategy, some users and authors resisted the strict approach to sexual norms by arguing that this endangers other important religious norms, like the stability of marriage, for example (Eliyahu, 2004). This means that a possible route for negotiation of sexual and gender norms is through prioritization within the religious system. Furthermore, this strategy also reveals that resistance to the strict religious approach to sexual norms can happen by negotiating within the religious system, not necessarily by bringing into the system external, modern concepts. This supports the claims of religious feminists like Ronit Irshai (2010) who calls for changing the system from within.

5) Peer regulation – In many of the comment sections, users corrected each other using shaming or othering tactics, thus enacting peer pressure. While the comment section was one of the areas where some resistance could be noted, it was also in the comment section that users most clearly enforced a strict religious approach to gender and sexuality on each other. Here, co-surveillance and peer-regulation were enacted to correct and normalize certain concepts and discourse on gender and sexuality. This is significant because it further highlights how this online religious discourse is not simply a top-down enforcement of rules and norms, but rather a more collaborative creation of norms. The peer-regulation that takes place in this discourse is an important aspect in how gender and sexuality are negotiated.

6) Othering the opinion/author – suggesting that the opinion or author is not Jewish/Orthodox/part of the “in-group” and thus delegitimizing their stance. This strategy was noted throughout the sample, but especially in Chapter V – for example, when suggesting that women who dress immodestly are not religious (Greenwed, 2015), or that a certain approach to modesty is “not-Jewish” (Chabad, 2017d). Othering is a common strategy in creating in/out groups and in normalizing certain behaviors (Johnson et al., 2004), one that is noteworthy in this dissertation research as a tool for both resistance and enforcement. Namely, this strategy highlights the fact that there is an ongoing attempt to decide what/who is in/out, thus supporting the notion that concepts of gender and sexuality are currently negotiated and that gender and sexual norms play an important part in defining one’s identity and community.

7) Avoiding or silencing practical/oppressive elements – presenting a positive view on gender/sexual relation while overlooking or downplaying the applied consequences of these norms. For example, discussing the joy and empowerment of domestic duties without mentioning how this viewpoint might make financial independence inaccessible to women. This strategy is noteworthy for several reasons: First of all, what is not said is as important to analyze as what is said. Silencing is in itself a discursive strategy that maintains certain knowledge as acceptable and other types of knowledge as invisible (Alcoff and Gray, 1993). Secondly, in the case of this discourse, the meaning of gender roles has practical consequences, and not mentioning these outcomes when discussing gender

norms is a silent acceptance of these outcomes, thus supporting the existing structures.

8) Framing social patriarchal structures as an issue of personal choice and joy – encouraging readers to understand patriarchal power structures as divinely inspired and a source of joy. This was noted especially in Chapter V. One prominent example is in Aish’s Tziporah Heller’s web article, in which she claims that “the Torah frees a woman to be herself with self-esteem and joy...” (Heller, 2000). That is, the religious (patriarchal) *Halachic* structures (“the Torah”) are framed as a matter of choice, freedom, and joy. This strategy is significant as it showcases how gender and sexual norms are constructed in this discourse. Furthermore, this strategy contributes to the neoliberal mindset presented in this discourse by focusing on self-actualization and choice.

9) Ascribing empowering and spiritual meaning to traditional gender norms – positioning women as more spiritually divine than men, and as a result they – like God – give, nurture, and stay covered. This strategy can also operate in imbuing domestic duties and sexual restrictions with spiritual and empowering meaning. This strategy was noted throughout the sample, for example, when rabbis answering questions prohibit pre-marital intercourse because sexuality is sacred, or when authors write about women praying at home (and not at the synagogue) because they have a closer relation to God. This strategy is telling as it reveals a tendency to frame oppressive or demeaning traditional practices (such



as, for example, not allowing women to have leadership roles) as practices that are dignifying and respectful to women.

10) Describing gender roles as “true” subjective selves – Many of the articles stress how traditional gender roles help users understand their true self, since gender is understood as essential to one’s identity. This attitude promises inner-peace and self-acceptance when assenting to your traditional gender role. For example, authors describe how traditional Jewish attitudes towards gender help men and women be their “true selves.” This strategy also supports the neoliberal aspects of the discourse by encouraging users to maintain correct gender norms as it will help them to “be themselves.” Furthermore, this strategy reveals assumptions about gender binary (man/woman) and that gender identity is an important part of one’s self.

11) Protecting communal boundaries and sacredness – Trying to create online spaces that do not have “problematic” issues, users call for a silencing of discussions on gender and sex. For example, in the reaction to the videos on Kipa discussing sexuality, many users in the comment section claimed that this type of content is not fitting for a religious website. Alternatively, in order to maintain a bounded, sacred Jewish community, some authors and users reject feminism and other secular values, as in examples from the comment sections throughout the sample. This strategy highlights how gender and sexuality are negotiated through the meaning they have for internet usage and for defining the community. When

users claim that a certain topic or article is “not fitting,” they reveal how ideal religious internet use should be, and what topics cannot be discussed.

12) Imbuing modern terms with a traditional/spiritual connotation – employing or/and distorting modern terms in order to make traditional norms acceptable.

For example, using the concept of partnership in marriage to maintain traditional division of labor (Lavi, 2015), or as in the above-mentioned example, with sexual harassment (Feigelin, 2010). This strategy is significant as it shows the need to negotiate gender and sexuality in modern terminology – that contemporary Orthodox Jewish society (and probably many other traditional/ religious societies in the West) need to make sense of both their traditional worldviews and the general, secular culture. Furthermore, it shows how religious and secular concepts are worked together to enforce a strict religious approach to gender and sexuality.

These twelve strategies describe in detail the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed and negotiated in this discourse, thus answering the research question this dissertation sought out to explore. Furthermore, through these varying strategies, it is noted that traditional patriarchal religious structures are maintained and enforced, and resistance to them is minimized. Most of the strategies are used to overtly enforce traditional gender norms or reframe traditional gender roles in positive ways (as empowering, joyful, etc.). When gender and sexuality are framed in this way, resisting on a macro, social level is harder because it seems like a matter of personal choice (or failure) and not a societal or gendered shared struggle. Many of the discursive strategies

adhere to a neoliberal logic, which is focused on individual choice, liberty, and empowerment. In some ways, the Orthodox approach to gender and sexuality in the digital discourse examined in this dissertation is similar to the theme demarcated by the term “vulnerable empowered woman” as coined and described by Dubriwny. According to Dubriwny, “The vulnerable empowered woman [...] is one who appears to have some agency and power to shape her own life” (2013, p.7). By encouraging women (and men) to view their problems and solutions at the hands of “individual women, not society,” this type of ideology avoids having to deal with societal changes. Thus, constructing a neo-liberal discourse allows these religious authors and users to maintain the traditional, *Halachic*, religious societal norms by moving it from the level of society or community to the level of the individual. Furthermore, through individual narratives these traditional norms become a source of empowerment and joy, of spiritual growth and meaning, and as such cannot be challenged.

***Negotiating and constructing gender and sexuality online: The three layers brought together.*** The pervious section described in some detail the findings from the three layers of analysis conducted throughout this dissertation. When these layers are brought together, three themes arise that more succinctly describe the findings of this dissertation:

- (1) Holy Women – Throughout this discourse, rabbis, female authors, and users create a discourse about gender that ascribes sacred meaning to traditional social-cultural gender norms. They do so by using religious language and metaphors to describe traditional gender roles. For example, claiming that women’s bodies are

holy and thus need to be covered more modestly than men's bodies, or claiming that women are closer to God than men are and thus need not participate in public prayer (as men do). By sanctifying gender, and, more specifically, framing women as holier than men, religious gender norms become harder to resist or to negotiate, because these norms are portrayed as a positive thing. Furthermore, the "holy" position of women suggests that females who accept and act out their gendered roles will find joy and personal meaning, and be empowered.

(2) Pious Sex – Discussion of sexuality throughout this online discourse reveals a tendency to present sexuality through a virtuous perspective, moralizing sexuality and tying one's religious devotion to their sexual behaviors. This is done by, for example, associating sinfulness and un-holiness with certain sexual behaviors. For example, Rabbi Sherlow explains to a young woman that by being modest and not touching boys, she is maintaining holiness. Furthermore, overwhelmingly, the approach to sexuality in this discourse was strict and minimized options for various religious interpretations and laws. For example, when it comes to female masturbation, a topic that is debatable in off-line Jewish *Halachic* texts, the online discourse in this sample clearly prohibited this practice.

(3) Sanctified Internet – the ability to discuss the above-mentioned two themes and the sensitive topics they raise demanded an approach to internet usage that framed it as a certain kind of religious/social space in which these topics can be debated. Users in this sample treated online communication as a part of their

religious lives and these websites as acceptable spaces for vocalizing and making sense of one's religious obligations and worldview. For example, many users commenting on the Q&A sections of all three websites constantly thank the rabbis and the website editors for allowing a religious space in which sexuality can be discussed. By dedicating online communication for religious use, it became possible to discuss even taboo matters.

These three conceptual metaphors—of holy women, pious sex, and a sanctified Internet – highlight the main findings of this research by demonstrating how religious use of the Internet allows for the discussion of gender and sexual norms, and how these norms, while openly discussed, are viewed through religious framing that enforces a strict and traditional approach. This also provides the basis for answering this dissertation's core research question: How are gender and sexuality negotiated and constructed in online Orthodox discourse. Through the discourse on these Jewish mainstream Orthodox websites, issues related to gender and sexuality, even those typically considered taboo within their communities, are discussed equally amongst users, rabbis, and lay people, men and women. These websites are created by religious organizations and individuals and seek to serve religious users. However, it was found that religious language used to discuss issue of gender and sexuality in these websites is presented in a simplified fashion. Perhaps this is because the websites are accessible to many different people (and thus are kept at a low denominator). By and large, religious language is used in a way that does not encourage a multiplicity of opinions. Furthermore, the rationale in this sample for maintaining a certain gender/sex behavior

was focused on the individual's needs, and less on the divine, the community, or the *Halacha* (you should do this because it is good for you). In other words, while the technological affordances allow for a more egalitarian religious discussion, the overall discourse presents a simplified Jewish view on gender and sexuality. This is further supported by the discursive strategies, which, by and large, present traditional gender and sexual norms as personal and spiritually beneficial, as noted above. In this fashion, oppressive structural religious gender norms are maintained and enforced by both websites' authors and users by framing these norms as empowering and joyful. In summary, this dissertation argues that gender is constructed online as binary, sacred, and traditional; and sexuality is presented as a behavior that should be restricted and monitored. This is done through the users' and rabbis' online negotiation of legal, daily, theological, and spiritual meanings of gender and sexuality. These negotiations resulted in peer-regulation and general enforcement of traditional and strict gender and sexual norms. The observations gleaned from this interdisciplinary dissertation offer a number of important insights for scholars in a number of fields. These contributions are discussed in detail in the next section.

### **Contributions and Future Research**

This dissertation's findings contribute to general research and the specific area of study in several ways. First, it contributes to Feminist and Communication Technology studies by discussing and articulating digital communication as a Foucauldian discourse,

and by specifying discursive strategies through which gender and sexual norms are maintained and resisted. Second, it contributes to the field of Digital Religion by operationalizing an analysis method that uniquely considers the sensibilities of researching religion and digital media. Lastly, it contributes to the study of contemporary Judaism, and specifically digital Judaism, by collecting and analyzing current Jewish attitudes towards gender and sexuality, as they are presented in Orthodox mainstream online media. Now I will expand on each of these contributions in more detail.

Firstly, throughout this dissertation I have insisted on conceptualizing digital media as a Foucauldian discourse. As discussed in the literature review chapter, digital media seem to both empower women and at the same time maintain gender binaries (Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 1996). One way to understand this duality is to think of digital communication as a site of struggle, different from other media because it reflects not only authoritative knowledge producers (as in rabbis, or more broadly, mass media producers), but the knowledge enacted by “everyone and no one in particular” (Bartsky, 1988, p. 80). I suggest we think of digital media as a **discourse in the making**, in which we can see the authoritative opinion, the concerns of lay people, the liberty to speak on taboo matters, the correction and negotiation of gender and sexuality practices and concepts. In other words, digital media (conceptualized as a discourse) offer a visual, tangible, and constantly accessible discourse.

Another contribution of this dissertation that could be helpful for feminist scholars is in naming and noting the discursive strategies that are used to maintain and

resist gender and sexual norms. The twelve discursive strategies highlighted in this dissertation as an answer to the question “how are gender and sex negotiated?” might resonate with other methods negotiating of power – for example, in examining other religious constructions and negotiations of gender and sex, or in examining Jewish negotiation of other issues, for example racism or nationality. The list itself – the work done in naming these practices – is a helpful step for researchers of discourse. While these specific strategies might change, need to be expanded on, or be rejected, having them described could be helpful for other researchers attempting to decipher the ways in which discursive power operates.

Secondly, the tri-layered critical discourse analysis model developed in this dissertation is especially suited for research in digital religion, as it takes into consideration the specific characteristics of studying religious discourse in digital environments. Scholars in this field are particularly aware of the need to examine both religion and media and how they work at the same time to construct theology, ritual, religious norms, and lived religious experiences. The tri-layered model tries to consider these different elements of digital religion, specifically when it comes to the negotiation of gender. As briefly discussed in the literature review, the study of digital religion is at an intersectional moment, in which questions of race, gender, sex, nationality, ethnicity, and more are brought into conversation. This model might be found useful for that type of study, which needs to consider religion, media, and a discourse concerning another element, such as race or ethnicity.



That being said, it is possible that the tri-layered critical discourse analysis could be useful in analyzing other forms of discourse, even those that are not religious or digital. This could be done by paying attention to whatever technological affordances via which the discourse takes place (printed books, for example, also have capacities and limitations) and by replacing a focus on “religious” with a focus on “cultural” terminology. In this way, communication researchers can pay attention to the “physical” elements that enable a certain discourse, the ideological tools or worldviews that inform it, and the discursive strategies that participants in the discourse employ for resistance, power, or both.

Lastly, this study provides a description of current Orthodox attitudes towards gender and sexuality. While the study cannot be generalized to represent the entire Jewish or Orthodox world, it does highlight certain trends and attitudes within them. Scholars of Judaism, and more specifically those researching digital Judaism or feminism and Judaism, can find valuable information and multiple examples in this dissertation, regarding Chabad, Aish, and Kipa as websites; their attitudes toward digital media; and the presentation of gender and sexual norms in these websites.

This dissertation sought to answer the question of “How are Jewish gender and sexuality concepts and norms negotiated and constructed via Orthodox digital discourse?” Put simply, it arrived at the following answer: The technological affordances of digital communication allow gender and sexuality to be negotiated on religious websites through a participatory discourse. Because these websites are operated as religious spaces, the negotiation of even sensitive topics can take place. These sensitive

topics are constructed and negotiated through a personal perspective which focuses on self-empowerment. In this fashion, traditional and even strict approaches to gender and sexuality are maintained and reinforced by rabbis, website authors, and users. Namely, traditional patriarchal structures are reframed to have theological, spiritual, or personal meanings. Resistance to these traditional structures becomes more difficult, since the discourse is at the level of the personal and not the social. Conceptualized as a Foucauldian discourse, it is noted that this online discourse maintains power through embracing subtle discursive strategies and through the words of users as well as rabbis. The “work” of enforcing gender and sexual norms in the Orthodox community online is enacted by all participants of the discourse, not only the religious authority.

While the research question of this dissertation is answered, the questions motivating this dissertation can be further explored. Further research into this topic might include expanding the material that is included in “Orthodox digital discourse” to incorporate additional, less-popular Jewish websites, or other sections of the sample websites. While this research aimed to examine mainstream Jewish discourse, scholarship would also benefit from exploring more peripheral discourses, for example about homosexuality or transsexuality. Another avenue that could further assess the findings of this research is to compare it to other religions online – to explore the construction and negotiation of gender and sex in other cultures/religions, such as Christianity, Islam, or in American teenage culture – to see if the twelve discursive strategies found in this research can be traced in other discourses. Lastly, further

research would benefit from employing the tri-layered model in different contexts, thus providing additional examination of its viability.

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